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*Anthony Boucher, in *The New York Times.*

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This latest issue of Mercury Mystery Book-Magazine also features shorter pieces by J. Edgar Hoover, Erle Stanley Gardner, Craig Rice, and Alan Hynd.

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We are happy to welcome Aaron Marc Stein to the pages of EQMM. Mr. Stein is a native New Yorker and still calls Manhattan his home; but actually he is equally at home anywhere else in the world — wherever he can go with a portable typewriter. Indeed, it might be any place from a hammock in the Yucatan jungle to the Italian hotel room in which Richard Wagner composed the second act of "Parsifal."

Aaron Marc Stein, you know, is at least two other people. He signs some of his books as George Bagby and others as Hampton Stone. His production record is phenomenal. If he doesn't publish 300,000 words a year, that year is virtually wasted. By the end of 1955 he had 53 novels to his credit, with numbers 54 and 55 on the presses almost ready for publication early in 1956.

But to give you a concrete idea of how Mr. Stein mixes his travel and 'tec-nology: the basic plot conception for "This Was Willi's Day" came to Mr. Stein during two rain-sodden weeks in Lucerne, Switzerland. The story took shape during another downpour, but this time at the summit of the Stanzerhorn. The writing of the story trailed across the French Alps and up through the Côte d'Or. And finally it was finished on a hot afternoon in Paris.

Now, travel with Mr. Stein . . . He will give you a vivid picture of Lucerne, and as vivid a study of a Swiss gigolo. "This Was Willi's Day" is a story of stature, with a full-bodied, penetrating characterization.

THIS WAS WILLI'S DAY

by AARON MARC STEIN

IT WAS HIS DREAM THAT GAVE WILLI joy — a dream of going and a dream of coming. He did try to picture to himself the things that might lie between, but that part of it never had more body than did the shadows on a movie screen. Always he reverted to the beginning of the dream and then to its end; for in them Willi could make every smallest detail come clear and hard and solid.

He would walk across the bridge toward the Bahnhof but he wouldn't go straight to the station. He would pause a moment at the end of the bridge where they had the pens for the ducks and the swans.

Ten francs for the maintenance of the waterfowl. Willi would drop it in the box and each time he had gone that far into the dream he would deliberately pause — to wrestle

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again with the one little problem which always stood alone in the whole big dream as the only thing Willi hadn't managed to lick. He could see the waterfowl when they would come around hours later. By then Willi would be well away, flying over Paris perhaps with the Eiffel Tower insignificant at his feet, or maybe already out over the Atlantic in the great plane that had risen above the clouds. Willi would glimpse himself as, with superb boredom, he looked down on the tops of the clouds; but at this stage he would never allow himself more than the briefest glimpse, because that was part of what lay ahead; and Willi wasn't such a fool that he would leapfrog one of the best parts of the whole dream. Firmly Willi would force himself back to Lucerne to stand invisible beside the man who smelled faintly of fish. The man would open the box and take out of it the scattering of small coins and among the little coins he would find Willi's ten francs.

That was the problem. Willi could see the man look at the ten francs, finger it to convince himself that it was real, shrug it off as the ten francs of one of those Americans who never did learn to add up properly in Swiss money. That was it. The man would never know that it was Willi's ten francs and Willi wanted very much that everyone in Lucerne should know — the doorman at the Schweizerhof who used to move him on before Willi became smart enough to know it was no good loitering out front and trying to see into the lobby; the doorman at the Palace who had the long nose and knew so well how to look down it; the ticket takers at the Kursaal who so often spotted last week's ticket when Willi tried to use it to get past the door this week.

An anonymous contribution — the words had a fine rich sound and on their fine richness Willi could dream himself away from the end of the bridge, dream himself into the Bahnhof, dream himself aboard a first-class carriage on the Zurich train. The rest was paradise. He knew that first-class carriage — knew it so well that in the dream he could even build for himself the exact feel of the seat cushion under his buttocks.

The Zurich train was really the best part of the dream. When Willi took the trains he never rode anything but first class — at least, he rode nothing else until the ticket taker would come through. Then Willi always left his seat and wandered casually off, as though he wanted to stretch his legs. Nobody had to know that he was stretching them as far as second class, where he belonged. This part of the dream, however, he could make completely real for himself. On that dream-journey he wouldn't get up to stretch his legs. Screening a superb yawn, he would flip his first-class ticket at the ticket taker.

It was after Zurich that the dream became shadowy. He knew just which

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plane it would be. He had all the brochures on the luxury flights and he had pored over the pictures long enough. He would sit in a cocktail bar as he flew over the Atlantic and he would be buying the drinks.

"Ask all these people what they like," he would tell the steward. "I'm buying."

It was good, but still it wasn't like feeling the seat cushion in the first-class carriage on the Zurich train. He couldn't begin to imagine what people would order to drink. Champagne? One would think that champagne would be the obvious choice, but on those luxury flights they served free champagne — it said so right there in the brochures. They served free champagne but they had a bar where Willi could buy other drinks as well. Willi, the big spender, would have to be in the bar, of course; but Willi wished he knew what one should drink there. It would have to be something so fabulous that one would be disdaining champagne for it and what was more fabulous than champagne? Willi didn't know. He promised himself that when the time came he would know. Somehow he would find out, because on that plane he wouldn't be this Willi who was a nobody. He would be the dream Willi — in the dream Willi with the money in his pocket and the knowledge in his head.

He always wanted to loiter here in the splendors of the sky. He always wanted to loiter in the magnificence of New York, but that was the part of the dream he could never keep from running thin. There would be Willi on the Empire State Building. Attendants, so splendidly uniformed that they made the doorman at the Schweizerhof look like a luggage porter, would bow to him from the elevator. They would greet him by name. They would click their heels. That he could imagine. He could also imagine himself in a pale yellow dinner jacket. He had seen such a dinner jacket going into the Kursaal on the night of a gala.

It would be in just such a dinner jacket that Willi would go to the Radio City Music Hall. Week after week throughout the season he would sit in his private box and throughout that vast theater — so vast that you could put ten Kursaals into it and lose them all — people would turn their opera glasses on Willi because Willi would be so rich and so important that he would have a season's box at the greatest theater in all the world.

It wasn't that he couldn't imagine it. It was just that he couldn't make it come solid and real the way he could the first-class cushion and the way it would feel under what would then be his first-class bottom.

Despite his wanting to take it slowly, to savor every rich detail of it, his mind was always scampering away from this shadowy part of the dream, reaching for the part of it that would come solid again, the return. He would land at Zurich and the huge Cadillac would be waiting

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for him at the airport. He would sweep into Lucerne in the Cadillac and he would pull up at the Schweizerhof.

He would hear the whispers.

"Look at him. They say he was once a Luzerner himself. Look at him!"

Willi looked and he felt good about what he saw. The mirror was cracked and spotted, but it served him well enough. He approved of the ruddy tan of his skin. It was the healthy, outdoor, mountain-sun look. That was essential. He approved of his dark brown eyes. Blue eyes, when they looked at a woman, always had something of hard boldness in them. Brown eyes smoldered. Willi liked to make his eyes smolder. It was an effect. He could turn it on and off at will. He rubbed his hand over his short cropped hair. The dream Willi would wear his hair longer and there would be a wave in it, but that would be later. Now it was right for it to be short. It gave him that boyish look and it was the boyish look that caught their eye every time.

It was the same way with neckties. The dream Willi would wear a necktie. It would be hand-painted and imported from Italy. It would cost a hundred Swiss francs, but that was also for later. Willi didn't have a hundred francs. He didn't even have three francs for a boat hire — not even three francs could he spare! — and anyhow neckties got you nowhere. If your throat was a good brown color and it came down straight and strong into your chest and you had good chest muscles to show, it went better without a necktie. The white shirt open halfway down the chest — that was boyish too. It was boyish and it was sexy, a combination on which Willi was staking his whole future. He approved of the white shirt. He had washed it himself and he had starched it and pressed it and it had been worth all the trouble.

Willi slammed out of his room without even another look at its dingy meanness. He hurried along through the back streets. When he came past the Bahnhof he was still hurrying. That stretch between the station and the piers where the lake steamers tied up he knew too well. There were always plenty of them there. They would be waiting to go up the lake — to the Pilatus and the Bergenstock and the Stanzerhorn. They would be buying chocolate at the stands by the piers and they would be buying the big, expensive Italian cherries, the big, expensive Italian apricots — as if francs grew on the trees. It was no good wasting his time here.

Willi hurried past them and crossed the bridge. Going back along the more fashionable side of the lake he slowed down to a saunter. This stretch of lakefront was for him — the big shops where they sold the fabulous watches the tourists bought, the place where they had the Italian sweaters and the French neckties and the English shoes, the Schweizerhof, the Palace, the Kursaal. He looked

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at the expanses of lawn and the stretch of park that lay between the hotels and the lake front and he deplored their beauty. It would suit his scheme so much better if these very best hotels were right down at the water's edge. It was one of those injustices — part of the great conspiracy that Willi had to fight — that put the de luxe hotels back from the water a little way and made those actually on the river, with their balconies overhanging the water, merely the good ones.

Slowly Willi pushed on, following the lake to the end of the town. He wished he had a watch. That was one of the measures of his ignominy — a Swiss who didn't even own a watch. Besides, it was inconvenient. Paul owned a watch and lived by his watch. Promptly when Paul's watch said 12:30, Paul went to lunch. Willi had heard the clock in the church of the Jesuits strike noon, but now it was not going to strike again before 1 o'clock and that would be too late. If Willi waited till he heard the clock strike 1, he would have too little time before Paul would have finished his lunch.

Coming around the bend, he squinted at the stretch of shore where Paul kept his boat. The boat wasn't there. Willi had to know the exact time. If Paul hadn't brought the boat in yet, then it would be fatal for Willi to loiter here — Paul was so mean about the damn boat.

Willi accosted a man and asked him the time. The man pushed his sleeve back and looked down at his wrist. The man had a watch and Willi silently reminded himself that a watch like this would be one of the things he was going to have — gold, self-winding, and it showed the date as well as the time. Willi knew just how many francs a watch like that cost down the street at Bucherer. It was one of those large sums Willi liked thinking about. He was thinking about all those francs and they filled his mind so satisfyingly that he almost didn't hear when the man told him that it was 12:35. Willi scowled at the shore where Paul should have had his boat tied up.

Then Willi saw it. It had been pulled up out of the water and was now lying bottom-up on the grass. Willi started toward it. He began cursing. That fool, Paul, had been painting it again. That was why he had it out of the water. With the paint wet on the boards and on the seats, it would be in no condition for Willi to use it.

Not that he cared about Paul's paint, but he had to care about his own shoes and his pants. They were the only halfway decent shoes he owned and his only untorn pair of pants. He couldn't let them get smeared with paint. He might have known that Paul would choose one of the days of a Kursaal *festnacht* for painting his crazy boat. With only two nights each week at the Kursaal in which to operate, and only a limited number of weeks in the whole season, Willi had no time to lose.

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Also there was his feeling. He'd had the feeling ever since he woke up that morning. This was going to be his day — Willi's day.

He stood over the boat and cursed the wet paint. He didn't have to touch it to know how wet it was. It glistened wetly and he could smell it. More out of angry vandalism than with any real hope, he leaned over and grabbed the newly painted boat to heave it over on its keel.

The boat came over and he grinned. Paul hadn't yet painted the seats or the floor boards and he hadn't touched up the oars. Willi dragged the boat across the grass and down to the water. He was getting paint on his hands, but hands didn't matter. He was very careful of his shoes and his pants and his shirt. The boat left smears of paint on the grass and Willi did have a passing thought for what he was doing to the paint on the boat's bottom. There would be grass stuck in it, and the gravel at the water's edge would grind against it and turn the boat into a pretty mess, but Willi had no regrets. Paul had it coming to him for being so mean about his boat. It didn't hurt the boat any if Willi used it for an hour twice a week. It wasn't as though Willi ever wanted it when Paul would be needing it. Paul had a watch and, when the watch said 12:30, Paul had to have his lunch.

Willi floated the boat and stepped into it. He was most careful to avoid getting paint on his pants or shoes. Quickly he drove the boat out into the current. The green water ran fast toward the Bahnhof bridge, but Willi was impatient. He rowed hard, putting all the weight of his back behind the oars. It might have been wiser if he had saved himself for the long pull back when he would need all his wind and muscle to row the boat against the current, but Willi had a stout heart. He would have more than enough strength left in him for pulling the boat back, and his stout heart kept telling him that this was his day — his day of destiny.

Willi, impatient for his destiny, didn't spare himself. He shot the boat under the bridge into the river. Here, narrowly channeled between the stone-faced banks, the green water carried him along with a rush. The waterfowl rode the current, ruddering themselves toward the railings at Unter Der Egg, gathering, as they always did at mealtimes, in the shadow of the hotel terrace.

Willi stopped rowing. Now he used his oars only to hold the boat steady against the current. For a couple of moments he watched the swans and the ducks. They were working as he did, maneuvering into position under the terrace, holding themselves there against the rush of the water.

Up on the terrace the linen and china gleamed in the sun. The crystal and the silver flashed light. Willi concentrated on the tables under which the waterfowl clustered most thickly. A family with children. Willi passed them up. Children were no good to him. At the next table a young couple

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had wine in their glasses. A pity it had to be a couple. Then there was an old couple. Willi made a mental note of the old couple. Matched up against the feeling he'd had all morning, an old couple wasn't much, but he just might be wrong and he had had pretty good luck with some old pairs on other days. A meal, a tip — it wasn't much but it did help and there had been that one old couple who told him they had a son like him back home. They had bought Willi a watch. It hadn't been a very good watch but he had been regretful when he had to sell it. He would like to have kept it, not for long but just till the time when he would have the watch he meant to have.

The ducks and the swans could have the old couple for the moment. Willi focused on the champagne bucket at the far end of the terrace. There was a waiter in the way and he couldn't see the table, but he prayed that it wouldn't be another couple. He was having that feeling again, the same feeling he'd had all morning. Something was telling him this would be it. He let the current carry him the length of the terrace. The waiter moved and Willi saw her hair. He winced. It was yellow hair and, just looking at it, Willi knew that it would feel like straw under his hand. It reminded him of the mattress on the cot back in his room, the way the rotting fabric would crack and the grayish-yellow straw would come bursting out of it.

Willi put his mattress out of his mind and concentrated on looking boyish. Deftly he brought the boat in toward the terrace, scattering the ducks and swans before him.

He came in under the table and held the boat there. The woman had a piece of roll in her hand and she waved it at Willi angrily.

"Go away," she shouted. "You've scared them. Go away."

Willi held fast and grinned at her.

"*Raus*," she screamed in what she obviously believed to be German.

Willi laughed. He never looked more boyish than when he was laughing. Her rings flashed in the sun. His feeling had been so right. Diamonds and champagne and not at the Schweizerhof or the Palace, but here at this merely good hotel. Willi knew the type.

She would have it — maybe even more than the women at the Palace and the Schweizerhof. This kind was careful. This kind let it pile up in the banks. Now that Willi was holding the boat still, the swans and the ducks came edging back. The waterfowl gathered thick along the sides of the boat. One of the swans actually brushed the boat and some of the fresh paint came off green on the swan's white plumage. Willi saw it and laughed some more.

She tossed the bit of roll. Willi was ready. As adroitly as any of the waterfowl he shot into position for it and, having the advantage in height over even the long-necked swans, Willi caught the morsel of bread between his fine white teeth. He tossed it back

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into his mouth and he grinned at her as he chewed it up.

She laughed. They always laughed, but she did more. She took up her knife and, breaking off another bit of roll, spread it with *pâté de foie gras.* This time it was easy. She threw it at him and it was no trick at all catching it in his mouth. They always threw stuff to him but Willi had never known one that could throw so accurately. It pleased him that she should have such a good throwing arm. Other times it had been butter on the roll and not *foie gras* and a clumsy pitch had once or twice hit Willi's shirt. That meant washing the shirt and getting it dry and pressed before evening and Willi hated washing his shirt. He had only the one presentable one.

The clock in the church of the Jesuits struck 1. He couldn't stay but a minute more. The pull back up the river against the swift current took time and it would be fatal if he didn't have the boat back before Paul finished his lunch and returned to the lake. But for one like this he was ready to push his time to the limit.

She kept it going, spreading *foie gras* on bits of roll and throwing them to him to catch. He never missed and all the time she laughed harder. She laughed and she drank her champagne. She was a little tight. Willi could see that but he took comfort from the steady accuracy of her throwing. He told himself that she couldn't be so drunk that she would forget him by evening. Laughing harder than ever, she picked up her wine glass. With a wide sweep of her arm she splashed champagne at him. He played along and managed to catch a few drops of the wine in his mouth, but more of it soaked his shirt. He shivered. It reminded him of the time Paul had caught him with the boat and had pitched him into the icy water of the lake. Paul with his damn muscles and his damn money. Climbing mountains every weekend, pulling the boat around all the time, always making himself more and more powerful, and always eating — the way that Paul ate! Willi glanced toward the church. He had more than stretched his time. Bending his back to the oars he pulled away.

"I'm sorry," she shouted. "Come back. Don't you want some of my cake?"

He turned to grin at her, but he didn't go back. His time had more than run out. He leaned hard on the oars and fought the current. He knew this river as well as the waterfowl knew it. He knew each place where a jut of the bank channeled the current off and offered a stretch of relatively quieter water. He took advantage of every one of those stretches, working against the current where he must, dodging it where he could. He made it under the Bahnhof bridge but here he could see the clock in the Bucherer shop window. There wasn't a hope. He had waited too long. Paul would be at the mooring. He knew just how Paul would look, his big fists clenched.

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Willi told himself that he was being a fool. Here he was trying to get the boat back to the mooring, trying to tie it up and be away before Paul came back from his lunch, as though he could do that today and Paul not know the boat had been used. Willi looked down at his hands and saw the paint under his fingernails. He could imagine what the boat's bottom would look like by now. Paul could never be deceived that day.

"The hell with Paul and his boat."

Quickly he backed the boat around into the current. He was laughing again as he rested on the oars and let the water carry him under the bridge and into the river. Skillfully he steered the boat to the bank in front of the market. He caught hold of one of the stakes by the landing steps and made the boat fast. He told himself what a good fellow he was. Anyone else would have turned the boat adrift and let that fool, Paul, go chasing it down the river. It was not as if he were going to need Paul or the boat again. His feeling had been so right. This was his day.

He left the boat and took off on a dead run. He knew Paul. Paul would already be down to the lake and have found the boat missing. Paul would be coming this way, heading down the river looking for Willi. Willi ran all the way back to his lodgings.

There he looked at himself in the mirror. He examined his shirt. The champagne had dried and there was no stain. He wanted to take it off and hang it up so that he could have it fresh for the evening. The good shirt and the good pants and the good shoes — he couldn't waste them by wearing them while he was waiting. He looked at his hands. They were green with paint. That was all right. Hands could be washed but he didn't dare take his shirt off. He couldn't be sure that some of the green mightn't come off on his shirt or his pants. He went to the cracked washstand and started working on his hands.

It wasn't easy getting the paint off. With turpentine it would have been no problem, but he didn't have any turpentine. Some of the paint came off with soap and water, but a lot of it remained. He dug it out from under his fingernails and he scrubbed at his hands as hard as he could. Then he thought of the emery board he used when he did his nails. With that he tenderly buffed the skin of his palms and his fingers. It took him a long time and when he finally gave up, his hands were hot and all but scraped raw. There were still bits of green stuck in the creases of his skin, but there was nothing he could do about those and they didn't show unless you looked for them. Willi remembered that there had been one of them early in the summer who had told his fortune. She had read his palm. If this one wanted to read his palm, she would see the paint, but there couldn't be another like that one. It was the one who had taken him to Interlaken so that he could show her the Jungfraujoch. A whole

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week it had been, and then he had lived a whole month on her tip and now almost another month on what he'd managed to pilfer. She'd given him the money to pay and she'd never asked for change, but he had always given her change — that is, a little change. Americans were like that — so smart about money except that they could never count in any money that wasn't their own American dollars.

Willi changed into a shirt and pants that didn't matter. He took off his shoes and lay down on his cot. He drifted into his daydream. Leaving Lucerne — the ten francs in the box for the waterfowl. Ten francs would more than pay them back for the bits of bread he had deprived them of, and if it hadn't been Willi there would have been no butter or *foie gras* anyhow.

His thoughts went back to Interlaken and that wonderful week, and a nasty fear caught at him. Everything had gone so well with that one and then suddenly she'd had a letter from her husband. They never wore their wedding rings and while he had been wasting all that good time on her he could have been missing out on just the right one.

Like this one today. He had looked most particularly. There were the diamonds but no wedding ring, as though that meant anything. He remembered the hole in the mattress and now he deliberately turned to look at the straw. He grinned at it. No need to be anxious about this one, he thought happily. Who would have this one? With hair like that?

"I'll have her," he promised himself. The dollars — all those beautiful, green dollars. The thought never entered his mind that there might already have been another like him, another lad ready, even eager, to shut his eyes to the hair, to all the big and little things that were wrong with the way she looked. It wasn't that he had any delusion he might be the only man in the world who wanted the dollars. His was another delusion. It just never occurred to him that there could be another anywhere in the world who would go about it so cleverly, who would have every word and every move so carefully planned.

He tried the dream with her in it, skipping the part where she would leave it. For his dream of coming and going, he was always alone — alone with the beautiful dollars.

Paul came slamming into the room. "This time I'm going to kill you. I'm going to wring your dirty, useless neck."

Willi yawned. "Hello," he said. "What bug is biting you now?"

"Didn't I tell you to leave my boat alone?"

"Who wants any part of your stinking boat?"

"You didn't put it in the water?"

"Was it out of the water?"

"You know it was out of the water. You know I painted it this morning. You know what a mess you made of it."

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"Me? I wouldn't do a dirty trick like that. Are you crazy? Somebody plays you a trick like that and right away you go looking for your friends. Why don't you go looking for somebody who has a grudge against you? What makes you think your friends would do a thing like that to you?"

"The mark of your hands is right there in the paint."

"My hands? You know my fingerprints, I suppose? You're a Sherlock Holmes now, I suppose?"

"Let me see your hands."

Willi put his hands behind his back and lay on them. "You want to compare the fingerprints, maybe? Go away. You're bothering me."

Paul slapped him. It was a heavy, backhanded slap and Paul's knuckles raked across Willi's mouth. Willi tasted blood.

"Show me your hands."

"Get out of my room. I'll count to ten and then I'll call the police."

Paul caught him by the arm and twisted. Willi screamed. He tried to fight it but the pain flipped him over on his face. He had his hand tightly clenched. Paul tried to open it. He picked up Willi's shoe and smashed the edge of the heel on Willi's knuckles. Willi's hand opened.

"Why don't you call the police? You don't count that slow. Call them. I'll show them your hands."

"Leave me alone."

Paul jerked Willi to his feet and slapped him again. Now Willi felt the blood run warm down his chin. He put up his hands and fought. He didn't want to fight, but he was desperate. He was thinking only of his face. He had to protect his face.

He would never have been any match for Paul but he did try to hold him off. With two good hands he might have protected his face, but one hand was all but useless. It throbbed and when he tried to close it in a fist the pain made him dizzy. He forced himself to shake the dizziness off but still the hand wouldn't close. He fought one-handed but he didn't really fight. He just kept the one hand up as a guard while he ducked and dodged. He tried to kick but it wasn't any good. Paul was ready for that and anyhow Willi had no shoes on.

Paul's fist came through Willi's guard and smashed into Willi's face. It struck once and it struck again. Willi went down. Paul waited for him to get up and Willi could have done it, but he stayed down. He hoped that it might still be all right, that his eye wasn't going to puff. Paul jerked him to his feet and held him upright, waiting for him to take up his own weight, waiting for him to put his hands up.

Willi let his hands hang. He dangled limp in Paul's grasp. Paul slapped him, trying to make him fight. Willi wouldn't be drawn. He just rolled his head with the slaps, hoping they wouldn't mark him too much. He knew his eye was swelling, but still he hoped.

Paul let him drop and, standing over Willi, kicked him hard. Willi

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lay with his head buried in his arms and hated Paul, hated him and despised him. Had he been Paul and Paul Willi, he would have kicked Paul. It wouldn't have been this harmless kick in the buttocks. He knew exactly where he would have kicked Paul.

Willi lay with his head buried in his hands and listened. He heard Paul stamp out of the room and clatter down the stairs. When the downstairs door slammed, Willi moved. He pulled himself to his feet and stumbled to his mirror. His lips were cut and bleeding, but the worst of it was his eye. His eye was hopeless. It would be a week or more before he could show that eye.

He knew it wasn't any use, but he had to try. He soaked a towel in cold water and pressed it to the eye. His hand was throbbing maddeningly. There was blood on his shirt. He thought it was a good thing that it hadn't been his better shirt and then, bitterly, that it didn't really matter any more. He took off the bloodstained shirt and soaked it in cold water, then wrapped the wet shirt around his hand. He worked on his face and his hand all the rest of the day, keeping the compresses cold. The pain ebbed but he didn't care about that. Every time he changed the compress, he looked at himself in the mirror and felt a pain that wouldn't ebb. She would have been the one. He knew it now with the most absolute certainty and now there had to be this to wreck his hopes. He'd never have another chance. He knew that also with absolute certainty.

From hour to hour he listened to the church clock strike. He heard six and he was still at it. Seven. Eight. At eight, he gave up. He had lost. Eight thirty was the time for the Kursaal. He should already have been on his way. He studied himself in the mirror for the last time and he couldn't bear it. He threw the towel and the wet shirt into the basin and ran away blindly.

He ran till his wind gave out. Then he slowed down to a walk, but he walked as he had run, steadily, aimlessly, mechanically, letting his feet carry him wherever they would.

When he came to the Kursaal he stopped. He circled the building, looking in through the windows, trying to catch sight of her. The yodelers were on. Then he saw her. She wasn't at a table with a drink like the other tourists. She was wandering about carrying her drink in her hand, as if she were looking for someone.

"She's looking for me," Willi muttered bitterly.

He could see her very clearly under the Kursaal lights. Those lights were kinder than the sun had been. Even her hair didn't look too bad — it might almost have been real hair. Willi dismissed her hair. He looked hard at her mink stole — pastel, soft, expensive. He forgot about his cut lip and bit hard on it. The pain reminded him, but he bit again,

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tasting the blood once more on his tongue.

She left the room. Thinking about her mink, Willi shivered. It was the first he realized that he had come out without even putting a shirt on. He turned away and walked down the path to the edge of the lake. He stood there looking at the water. Then he heard her voice at his shoulder, but he didn't turn his head.

"Hello," she said. "Or don't you speak English?"

Willie turned to speak to her. "I've had a misfortune," he said. "You must excuse me."

She laughed. "Aren't you cold without a shirt?" she asked.

An idea began to bloom in Willi's mind. He didn't wait for it to finish shaping itself. He stepped full into the light so that she could see him. The hell with his eye. He knew how good he looked with his shirt off and now he had nothing to lose. He chose the English words carefully.

"I can't afford to be cold," he said. "I haven't a shirt."

"Oh." She took a step away from him. She looked puzzled and uncertain.

"You don't know me?" Willi asked. "You don't remember?"

"Should I know you?"

She didn't have any idea who he was. He could see that she was simply looking for a man, any man.

"I enjoyed the *foie gras*," he said. "I hope you didn't think I was rude not waiting for the cake."

She blinked and then started laughing. "My duck," she said. "You're my duck from lunch time."

Willi clicked his heels sharply and bowed.

"Yes," he said. "Your duck."

"But what's happened to you? Have you been in a fight?"

Sighing, Willi nodded. "Robbers," he said. "Four of them." Now the idea had flowered and he didn't have to stop to examine it. He knew it was good. This was his day, wasn't it? "I fought them as well as I could," he said, showing her the hand Paul had smashed with the shoe. "But four of them. They beat me unconscious and when I came to they were gone and had taken everything — my money, my watch, my coat, even my tie and my shirt and my shoes."

He went on and on about the shoes. The robbers had taken his and had left him these terrible things. They had even taken his trousers. One of them had been his size and while he was unconscious they had stripped him and changed clothes with him.

She took charge. Tenderly she helped him to her car. Willi hadn't dreamed of a Cadillac at this early stage. The Cadillac was to have come later. She took him to a doctor and Willi noticed that doctors were much gentler when there was money about. He looked much better when the doctor had finished with him. The bits of neat white tape against the bronzed skin weren't a bad effect at all.

After that it was clothes. Willi

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didn't even have to guide her. There was only one shop that kept open that late in the evening, the place that had the stuff that caught the tourist trade. She did the choosing. The English shoes, the Daks trousers, the French shirt, the Italian silk necktie, the beautiful tweed jacket. She even wanted to buy him a nylon undershirt but he wouldn't have that. He never wore an undershirt, he said. Besides, he always gave them change. It was good policy not to seem greedy. Not taking an undershirt was like giving her change. She even thought of the sun glasses.

"Like a Hollywood star," she said.

"But you mustn't," Willi said. "I don't know when I can ever pay you back."

"I want to dance," she said, and she bought him a beautiful billfold. She put five hundred francs into the billfold and slipped it into the pocket of the beautiful tweed jacket.

Willie took her back to the Kursaal. They did the rhumba and they even did the Charleston. Willi couldn't be bothered by the fact that the rhumba made him hurt in the place where Paul had kicked him and that the Charleston made him hurt a lot worse. They had champagne but they didn't drink much of it. Willi tried to make her drunk, but then it occurred to him that she was trying to make him drunk and he stopped worrying. She was going to be too easy, but still he was careful. He ate but he didn't drink much and, watching her, he saw that she neither ate nor drank. She was just pretending that the wine was making her gay.

They danced till the Kursaal closed and then she said she wasn't going to let him go home alone. He was hurt and she was going to go with him and take care of him. He told her that they couldn't go to his place. He reminded her of the robbers. They had wrecked his place. They went back to her hotel and she packed a bag and then they drove over to another hotel. Willi registered them as Mr. and Mrs. It was her idea.

"I don't have to seduce her," Willi told himself gleefully. "She's seducing me."

First thing the next morning they were married and she bought him a wedding present — a gold watch, self-winding, that told the date as well as the time. Willi drove the Cadillac and it was well that the place where Paul had kicked him did hurt as he sat behind the wheel. It was as good as pinching himself. He wasn't dreaming.

It was funny. He'd had it all so completely worked out — every last detail and how he would manage it when he had the big chance. Now it was happening and he wasn't managing anything. She was having all the ideas and she acted as though she had not the slightest notion that they were actually Willi's ideas. He wondered if it could be that he had her hypnotized, that he was making her do everything he wanted her to do without even knowing he was doing

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it. He remembered that he had heard somewhere that certain exceptionally strong minds could do miraculous things. Willi watched his destiny shape itself and he hadn't the least doubt of the extraordinary strength of his mind.

The way he had always planned it himself, it would have been a slow and careful campaign, taken move by move in a calculated sequence. He had never dreamed of a woman like this one, a woman who would rush him off his feet, who would make the moves even before he had begun to prepare her for them, who, if anything, seemed to be preparing him.

All of it happened on that very first day — even the will. In his own planning it had always been a matter of weeks, even of months, before he could let himself so much as begin to lay the groundwork for a will. Now it was happening in such rapid sequence that it made Willi dizzy. The two-ring ceremony, buying him the watch, rushing him around to the American Consulate.

At first, the consulate baffled Willi. He had never dreamed so splendidly. The way she was received at the consulate dazzled him. She was known, she was important. They treated her with deference. Willi never opened his mouth. He just listened, trying to take it in, trying to make himself believe that it could really be this magnificent.

She was emphatic. She was definite, dictatorial. She had come to make a will. She wanted it made at the consulate. She wanted it so firmly a matter of record that there could never be any nonsense about it.

"That family of mine," she said. "You know what they're like."

They knew what her family was like. She began dictating. Willi tried to hold the amounts in his head, but they got away from him. This charity, that charity, and everything in five figures — dollars, at that, not francs.

"The residue of my estate to my beloved husband, Willi."

"Your brothers?"

"My brothers can go scratch."

There had to be four copies — one for her, one to be kept on file at the consulate, one to be sent to her lawyers in New York, one to her eldest brother.

"They might as well know right away where they stand," she said.

Willi was angry with himself. Wasn't this exactly the way he'd always wanted it? Wasn't it better than he'd ever dared to hope? Was this a time to have any anxieties or misgivings? He worked hard at putting every disquieting thought out of his mind. So he hadn't figured on anything so conspicuous as the consulate. What of that? He hadn't dreamed that it would be anything like this much money either.

It made no difference. He would have to wait, of course, but then he had always planned on being patient. He had never thought that he would get this far and then become reckless. Nothing was changed.

He didn't allow himself to think it

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but he knew what his real trouble was. It was the next step, the step he had always skipped over in his dreaming. There had always been all this, and then there had been the departure — the ten francs in the box for the waterfowl, the first-class ticket to Zurich, the luxury plane across the Atlantic. In that part of it Willi was always alone and he had always known what he would have to do in between; but he had always let that part of it go with the assurance that when the time came he would know how to act.

Now the time had come.

It was no good telling himself that it wouldn't be safe to do it so soon. She had hurried him this far and now it wasn't too soon to begin the job of planning it. For this part he would need the best plan he had ever made, and he didn't feel ready to start thinking about that.

She was his princess and he was her duck. They spent the rest of the first day hilariously and extravagantly. Willi almost began to wish that she wasn't so terrible looking, but he resolutely put that thought away. She wasn't going to make Willi go soft.

He didn't put off thinking about it for long. The very next morning he began, but even then it started because she helped him. She was sick in the morning, green in the face with sickness. Even though the look of her disgusted him, Willi carefully did all the correct things. He was her devoted duck. He was frantic with worry. He wanted to get a doctor.

She wouldn't have a doctor. She had been this way before — it would pass. He was to leave her alone. Willi would have been glad to leave her alone but he had to do the correct thing. She would have none of it. Sharply she ordered him out of the bathroom. He withdrew with dignity. He sat in the bedroom and waited, listening to her being sick the other side of the bathroom door.

His normally cheerful turn of mind took hold of him. She knew what this was and she wanted no doctor. He thought of some incurable illnesses. He almost let himself hope that she would take care of this part of it for him, too. He wouldn't even plan his next move. The jewelry she had worn the night before lay on her dressing table, the diamonds blazing in the morning sun. Willi strolled over and picked up a ring. He tried to guess what it might be worth. He tossed it in the air just as though it were another bit of bread, and like a bit of bread he caught it in his mouth. The big stone was cold against his tongue. He liked it. It seemed to him that it tasted like money. He was enjoying the thought that he didn't have to practise up on that trick any more. It had served.

He spat the ring out into his palm, carefully dried it off, and returned it to the dressing table. Her bag lay with the jewelry. He listened a moment. She was still at it behind the bathroom door. He picked up her bag, opened it, idly explored through it. He came on a picture and looked

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at it with mild curiosity. It was a man, big, athletic, handsome. One of her brothers? He wondered. Not likely, the way she had talked about them at the consulate. He put the picture back and pulled out a letter. It was postmarked Venice and dated less than a week back. Willi read the letter.

"Sorry, my dear, but you did know I was married . . . never a possibility of divorce . . . my wife's religious feelings in the matter . . . sorry . . . are you certain there is no mistake . . . doctors are wrong sometimes . . . believe me, I am sorry."

Folding the letter, Willie returned it to her bag. He closed the bag and arranged everything as it had been on the dressing table. He could still hear her behind the bathroom door, but now Willie was finished with any cheerful thoughts about incurable diseases. So that was what was wrong with her! It was all right. It made no difference except for driving all the foolishness out of his head.

She'd had her own plan and her plan had called for haste. Now she had a father for her brat. She had what she wanted. Now Willi was taking over. She had been smart, but she'd picked the wrong man. She should never have been smart with Willi. She had walked straight into his trap. Now *he* could plan it and he would enjoy planning it. It was only what she had coming to her — thinking she could use Willi! She'd find out who was using whom.

Now that he had begun thinking about it properly, the whole plan came into his head in one solid piece. It was as though it had always been there, just waiting for the moment when he would need it. It had always been there — just as the mountains had always been there. All he needed was patience. He couldn't miss, but he mustn't rush. When it happened, it had to be right. There mustn't be too many questions. It mustn't come too soon after the making of the will. Of course, he couldn't wait too long. It would have to happen before the brat came — that was certainly the outside limit. Willi was no fool. He could visualize another scene like the one the morning before.

"And the residue all to my child, Frederico."

The letter had been signed — *Yours always, Frederico.*

Before the birth of the brat certainly, and enough before so that his taking her up the mountain wouldn't look odd. A month or two would be enough to wait, and while he waited they were to be seen together, always laughing, always happy, always — the way she would say it — living it up. He could wait that long to make it look good. For a stake like this he could wait as long as he had to . . .

When she finally came out of the bathroom, he was gentle and solicitous. He was every inch her duck. She didn't want to talk about it, so he didn't talk about it. She wanted to be gay, so he was gay.

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They were at lunch when she herself suggested the mountain. It was like all her other suggestions, a command. She was still rushing him, Willi thought wryly, but this she couldn't rush. He was going to wait till the time was right, but meanwhile he could start her training. There had been the hour before lunch during which he had come to feel that waiting for the right time wasn't going to be too bad. She had taken him shopping, but this was not like the emergency shopping of the first evening. That sort of thing wasn't good enough for her husband. Now it was measurements. Willi had been measured for suits, for shirts, for shoes. For Willi everything had to be made to order.

"This is just to fill in," she said airily. "This stuff will do till we go to London or Rome where we can have the right sort of clothes made for you."

In all Willi's dreaming he had imagined grand gestures — but he had never imagined anything so grand as ordering half a dozen thousand-franc suits of clothes and telling the tailor that, of course, a Lucerne tailor couldn't be really first-rate, but that these feeble thousand-franc efforts would have to do for the journey to London or Rome. Willi had begun to think that the time he would have to wait would indeed not be wasted. He could use it for training her, but he could also permit her to train him. She would teach him how to spend money. For the first time in his life Willi was ready to believe spending money was an art in which he still had something to learn.

She left it to him to choose the mountain and he selected the Stanzerhorn. They were going to concentrate on the less frequented peaks. It was to be the honeymoon celebration. The duck would take his princess to the places where they could be alone with the mountains and the snow and the sky, far away from people. There would always be a mountain railway, of course, and it would supply him all the people he would need. When the time came, the people could testify to the affection and light-hearted gayety of the newly married couple.

They rode the cable railway up the long slope to the foot of the mountain and they were as gay as a pair of children on a school holiday. They had bought some of the fine Italian cherries at the stand by the boat landing and all the way up on the train they amused themselves eating cherries. She would toss them in the air for him to catch in his mouth. Some he would catch and eat, but most he would catch by the stem, and then she would lean across to bite the fruit that dangled over his chin. It was a pleasure watching them. Everybody watched.

At the top of the railway they disdained the level path that led to the hotel and struck out over the rough, steep track that led to the summit. Here Willi became protec-

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tive. At least, he made a try. He took her arm. He made a great show of guiding her over the difficult footing. She was going to have to learn to depend on him, to go along the most dangerous slopes secure in her confidence that Willi would take care of her. She was to learn to depend on Willi's strong right arm, to expect that it would always be ready to reach out and snatch her safely back from death. Little by little he planned to teach her. She would learn to be foolhardy in the mountains, to depend on Willi and to trust him.

He took her arm, but laughing at him, she pulled away and went nimbly up the rocky trail with Willi in pursuit. She took those very chances he had planned on teaching her to take. Willi followed, telling himself that he might have known that here, too, she would be competent. He hadn't forgotten the accuracy of her throwing arm, but that was all right. He wouldn't have to lead her to the dangerous places: he could let her lead him.

At the summit Willi caught her in his arms and kissed her. A man and a woman were leaning on the iron railing, looking down with shuddering delight at the sheer tumble of rocks that dropped with frightening grandeur to the velvety patch of jade that was the broad valley far below.

Willi hadn't expected her to respond to his embrace as wholeheartedly as she did. They might have been alone in their hotel bedroom, she came to him with that much abandon. Tittering, the other couple started down the path from the summit, leaving Willi alone with his princess. He led her over to the rail and together they looked down the dizzying mountainside.

A few feet below them, in a crack in the rocks, there grew one solitary spray of edelweiss.

"I must get it for you," Willi said.

"You can't get down there."

"Watch me."

Willi knew what he was doing. He gave her his stick to hold for him. Confidently he climbed over the rail. Taking a firm grip on the steel stanchion that supported it, he lowered himself till he dangled by one hand from the base of the stanchion. There was a small rock projection where he could plant his feet. He couldn't have been safer in bed. He had the stanchion firmly gripped with his good hand, and his feet were well planted. The hand Paul had battered was still not too good, but it was good enough for plucking a bit of edelweiss from the cranny in the rocks and he was not depending on the injured hand for his hold. He swung his body wide, reaching for the little flower. It wasn't a dangerous swing but he made it look dangerous. From watching him take such chances she was going to learn to take them with him until the time would be right.

The blinding pain in his good hand jerked his body stiff. His feet slid away from the ledge where he had planted them. His head snapped up

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and he looked straight at her. He half expected he would see Paul standing beside her, but she was quite alone. In that rigid second he watched her raise his stick and with an easy, practised swing smash it down on his hand a second time. The hand gave way and Willi slammed downward, bouncing from rock to rock.

"That was her plan all along," Willi thought. "I had to give mine time. She didn't. She never wanted me. She wanted a father for her brat and she made sure there would be no doubt of it. The consul knows. Her brothers will know. She has the marriage license and, if any questions are asked, no one will think she could have planned to kill her husband — not a husband for whom she ordered all those new suits and shirts and ties."

Willi's last thought was the bitterest of all. She could cancel all the orders now. There was nothing to stop her. It would suit her plan to cancel them. He had thought that he needed time to build up evidence of his love and devotion. She had built faster than he had — much faster.

NEXT MONTH . . .

One of *her* most enjoyable stories —

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG's *Ten Clues for Mr. Polkinghorn*

and

one of *her* most enjoyable stories —

MARGERY ALLINGHAM's *Catching at Straws*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	FREDERICK NEBEL
TITLE:	*The Man Who Knew*
TYPE:	In the Black Mask manner
LOCALE:	Anywhere
TIME:	Anytime
COMMENTS:	*The jury was still out, but it seemed clear that most people thought she was guilty — guilty as sin. But aren't there supposed to be two sides to every story?*

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE SOMEONE came into the bar and mentioned it. Not everybody, but one out of three anyhow. There had been a lot about it on the 9 o'clock broadcast, and it wasn't ten yet, so naturally a lot of people were still discussing it. But it was the little fat man who really kept the ball rolling.

"She's guilty," he said, "or my name is mud."

He was going to keep on saying things like that and after a while I was going to do something about it. I felt it in my bones.

Between mixing drinks the barman would pinch his glasses onto his nose and read a little more about it. When somebody asked him what he thought, his reply was always the same. "Well," he said, "not knowing the ins and outs of it, it's hard to say. There's two sides to every story, and just by reading about it, or hearing about it on the radio, you can't fairly judge." He said it exactly the same every time.

The fat man laughed lightly. His arms were short and his hands plump, with pointed fingertips, and he wore a fussy bow tie under his soft white jowls. Whenever he said anything he tipped his head back and looked down his pointed nose.

"Well," the barman said, "the jury ought to bring in a verdict tomorrow. Anyhow, in the end, I figure that justice will prevail." He was a slow-spoken big man, middle-aged, with deep creases up and down his rusty cheeks.

The fat man looked pained. "Jus-

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tice!" he said, leering around the bar. "My dear man, you are naïve!"

I don't know why I hung around listening to him, unless maybe I enjoyed hating him.

He spread his hands, the soft white palms upward. "The husband comes home, finds his wife entertaining his best friend. The husband is shot. Suicide, claim the wife and the friend. Jealous husband commits suicide. Drunk. Commits suicide." He smiled pityingly. "There is nothing new about that, gentlemen."

I said, "Barman, another beer."

"Yes, sir."

"A pretty girl, a pretty leg, a soft injured expression." You could tell the fat man liked the sound of his voice. "Justice becomes a mockery. Gentlemen," he said, raising his beer, "whatever verdict the jury may bring in, *I* say she is guilty."

All right, bright pants, I thought; all right, you asked for it. "Look," I said, "just what do you know about justice?"

He turned and stared at me as if he had never seen me before. "What do I know about justice, friend?"

"That's right," I said. "Define it. What is it?"

"Why, my friend, justice is equitableness. It is the quality of being just. It is rectitude. It is merited reward or punishment. Or punishment, my friend. I believe you will find it thus defined in any standard dictionary."

"It sounds bookish, all right," I said. "Then there's another one about the rendering to every one his due. Right?"

"Perfectly."

The barman tried to stop me but he wasn't quick enough. I let the fat man have my beer smack in his face and somebody sitting at one of the tables laughed right out. I was shaking and I couldn't say anything and I kept the empty glass in my hand, my hand raised, ready to let him have the glass over his fat head if he came back at me.

The barman came around the bar and stood in front of me. He took the glass out of my hand and banged it down on the bar. He got hold of my arms above the elbows. He was strong and he wasn't pleased.

"You can't do that in here, mister," he said.

"Can't I?"

"Don't get tough with me, mister."

The funny thing about it was that the fat man didn't say anything. First off, he couldn't because a lot of the beer had hit him right in the mouth. Then when people laughed, he looked embarrassed. His face turned red and his thick lips kind of blubbered. But he didn't say anything — he didn't say a single word. He was busy wiping his face and the front of his coat.

"Here, barman," he said, his voice half lost. "Three beers." His eyes were glassy as he put some change on the counter. Then he turned and drummed out on his short legs and in a minute there was the sound of him gunning off in his car.

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I was sorry I had done it. I liked the barman and I was sorry I had done something in his place to make him sore.

"Will you give me a pint of beer to take out?" I said.

He drew a pint and I paid for it and for the three beers I had at the bar.

"I'm awfully sorry about that," I said.

He put his hands flat on the bar and stared stonily between them. His face was like a hunk of wood and his lips were shut tight. I was sorry he was sore and I knew if he knew Polly used to be my wife he would understand. But I went out without telling him, because what was that to him?

It was a swell night, soft and warm, with a lot of stars. The bar was at the edge of the city, out among the filling stations, and it wasn't much of a walk to the overnight cabins. I walked along the edge of the road, off the pavement, the big trucks rumbling past, the cars swishing. The cabins were scattered among birches and maples and there was a brook in back and ours was on the bank of the brook, with a lean-to for the car.

Jo was lying on one of the cots smoking a cigarette and listening to music on the portable radio. The radio was turned low and mixed in with the music was the sound of the brook running over the rocks.

"Did you get it, darling?"

"Yes," I said and handed her the beer.

She stretched her arms, her slender body, and got up. "Gee, it's nice here, Jim. Hear the brook?"

"It's sure nice. I'm glad we stopped."

We had crackers and individual triangles of cheese wrapped in foil and there were two glasses for the beer. There was a card table too and we sat down on camp stools and spread cheese on the crackers and drank the beer.

"Jim," she said.

"What?"

"Something happen?"

"Happen? No. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. You just look as if something happened."

She wasn't going to make an issue of it. We had been married two years and she never made an issue of anything. She'd ask you something, and if you didn't answer, she'd drop it. I looked at her and she looked at me and smiled and made a face to show how she enjoyed the beer. You wouldn't know her unless you saw her eyes. They were brown, like her hair, and there could be the deepest gravity in them or there could be the best kind of fun. I had been married to Polly for three years and it had been nothing like this — nothing like it at all; but it had been something else, something that stuck with me, and was hard to get rid of.

"Well," I said, because when they don't insist on having an answer, you give it, "some guy in the bar was shooting his mouth off. I let him have a face full of beer."

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She spread cheese on a cracker. "The radio said the jury was still out." She had a way of knowing what I was thinking about.

I wanted to change the subject right there. "Well," I said, pouring some more beer, "we'll reach the camp about three or four tomorrow. That'll be time enough to get in some wood and start a fire, in case it turns cold at night. I'd better put the screens up. If it stays warm like this, we'll get flies."

"I'll wash the windows first."

"No use doing too much work. After all, we're going up for a vacation." It was some vacation, all right, with the trial on and the jury still out. But you take your vacation when they give it to you. "I'll wash 'em on the outside and you can wash 'em on the in."

"All right. If it's warm, Jim, and no flies or bugs, let's sleep outside one night. On the pine needles. Out in the open, though, under the stars."

"All right."

She folded her arms across her chest and squeezed. "It'll be lovely." She could say a thing like that and it went over you like soft warm water.

She undressed and got in bed, sitting up and shaking out her thick brown hair, combing it many times, first to the left, then to the right. I watched her and now and then she smiled at me and I smiled back and when she was finished combing she tied a ribbon around her hair, under the back of it at the nape, with the knot of the ribbon up on top. Then she lay back. She held her arms up, saying nothing, smiling at me.

I went over and sat on the side of the cot and kissed her and she held my head in her hands. When I finished kissing her she gave me a quick little kiss on the cheek and said:

"When you go to bed, dearest, don't forget to turn off the radio. Good night."

I'd gone to sleep the last two nights with the radio turned on, listening for any late news flashes on the trial. Ernie Pendleton had been a big shot: young, lots of dough, polo, Palm Beach, Aiken, Long Island — things like that. So the trial was big news.

"Suppose we get up at 7," I said.

"All right. Set the alarm, will you?"

I turned out the lights and in a little while she was asleep. The sound of the brook in the darkness was pleasant and refreshing and I carried the portable radio out, put it on a rock above the water, and sat down on another rock beside it. I'd wait till 11 for another news broadcast and then turn in.

It was pretty bad because it was either first degree or acquittal and you don't forget about a woman you once lived with for three years. Divorce doesn't make a clean cut, ever. There's always something left over; you pick up particles of her and they drop off easily. The thing was, I should never have married her. Not because I didn't love her: I did. But it was my last year in college and I was the big-shot quarterback

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and she was romantic and so was I and that was the way it was. Only she'd been brought up on a lot of money and Europe and the places people with a lot of money go to. I was just a guy on a scholarship and my people were country folk — storekeepers. It was money, really — the lack of money. And she had a temper, a terrible temper — and I have one too. We both said nasty things sometimes and it got worse and worse. And then she wanted a divorce. I knew then it was Ernie Pendleton, and sure enough, a month after the divorce they were married.

Understand, I didn't want that all over again. That was through, washed up. I loved Jo and nobody else — nobody else at all. But Polly was in a jam, a bad one, and what I remembered was not the last year of our marriage but the first, and the first was something. It's like when you go on a vacation: it rains some days and some days the sun shines, and afterwards you remember the times the sun shone.

I sat there in the darkness on the rock above the water a long time. There was nothing new on the 11 o'clock broadcast, but I still sat there and in a little while Jo came out in her bathrobe and said:

"Jim, it's a long drive tomorrow. Won't you get some sleep?"

I picked up the radio and got up all in one motion. "I was just coming in."

She linked her arm in mine and rubbed her cheek against my shoulder. "It'll be all right tomorrow, Jim. Everything will be all right tomorrow. I know it will."

"Did the radio wake you up? I tried to keep it low."

"I wasn't asleep, really."

She got back in bed and I turned out the light and undressed and got in bed too. Then I remembered I hadn't set the alarm clock and said, "Damn it."

"What?"

"The alarm clock. I forgot —"

"I set it, Jim. For seven, wasn't it?"

We got away at 7:30, and when the city was behind us there were woods and fields, and in the fields long layers of mist still hung and it looked as if it was going to be a nice day. At 8 I turned on the car radio and the jury was still out.

Jo said, "That means acquittal. When they're out that long, it means acquittal."

"I don't remember —"

"I remember any number of cases," Jo said. "When they're out that long, it means acquittal. Any number of cases."

"I'd hate to be in her shoes, though."

Jo looked straight ahead up the straight road. "Yes, I would too."

"She was never strong, really. That is, she was always tense. Everything she did or said, she put everything she had in it — always this tension and excitement. She was built that way, she couldn't help it — she gave off sparks all the time. She couldn't

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go to sleep until all hours in the morning. She'd dance for hours and be a wreck next day. She couldn't stop it. By now, with this trial and the jury out so long, she must be a nervous wreck. She never deliberated. She'd do a thing, say a thing, right off the bat — quick, like that."

Jo said, "From all I've read about Pendleton, he must have been something like that too. All nerves and no body. Too much money and too little responsibility. He must have led her a terrible life. Men like that frequently kill themselves and wreck other lives, too."

"Do you think he killed himself?"

"Absolutely. He's the type. His big gestures have been in the papers for several years. He just ended up with the biggest gesture of all."

She slid up close to me and slipped her arm under mine and held it lightly, so it wouldn't interfere with my driving. The mists disappeared from the fields and the sun was warm and bright. The air was very clear and fresh off the hills we were going into. The hills rose one after another and in the valley was the river, full and swift from the spring rains.

"Last fall, you remember," Jo said, "there was nothing but rocks."

"After the drought, you mean."

"Oh, Jim, I'm so glad we bought the camp."

"It could be nearer; but nearer, they ask impossible prices."

"No, I like it where it is. It's far enough away so that when we go there, we feel we're really away. If it was nearer, we'd be having more friends up all the time, and that would mean we'd want to furnish it better."

"I never thought of that."

"And we can be alone. Oh, Jim, I love being away with you, alone."

"I love being alone with you too, Jo."

"All inside me and outside me and all around me, I love you."

"Yes, Jo, it's like that with me too."

She rubbed her nose against my arm, making a funny little sound.

"Hey," I said, "in a minute we'll be in a ditch."

"I'd love you in a ditch too, Jim."

We made good time and reached the camp a little before three and though it wasn't much, three small rooms, we owned it and we owned two hundred feet of lake front.

We carried the stuff in from the car and then I brought some logs in and got a fire going in the fireplace. It was pretty damp, so we lit the oil heater in the bedroom and also the oil cookstove in the kitchen. I started the gasoline pump in the pumphouse and pumped a tankful of water.

"How about ice, Jim?"

"I'll go down and get some."

I guess I did a lot of running around and made a lot of noise, because when you make noise you think you are very busy and have no time to think. It works a little but not all the way.

Anyhow, by night I'd know. By night, surely, it would be over, and whatever it was, I'd know. If it was

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guilty, it was guilty, and what I'd do about that I didn't know, though I tried to be very careful thinking about it. It would be like trying to hold a door shut against a terrible wind, because Jo was my life really, something I could put my hands on and feel and know it was there, while the other was a ghost I tried to thrust away but couldn't.

The iceman cut me a cake of ice and I put it in the sack and swung it in the trunk of the car. Driving back, I thought about the fat man in the bar and hated him all over again and I hated everybody, all the people I didn't know, who said she was guilty. I hated the jury for staying out so long. Didn't they know how she'd been brought up? Pampered and spoiled by rich parents, rich uncles and aunts; led to believe that she was one of the chosen people. Beautiful and headstrong and scatterbrained. All nerves. Tender one minute and a wildcat the next. Generous one minute and selfish the next. Proud and imperious. Didn't they know all that?

I swung the sack of ice out of the trunk compartment, carried it up to the back porch, and dumped it in the ice box. When I went inside Jo was standing by the radio. She had her hand on it, but it was silent. Her face was very white and I could see her throat quivering.

"It's — it's all right," she said.

"It's all right?"

"Yes, it was just on the radio."

I sat down beside the radio and looked at it. "I didn't hear it," I said.

"Just a minute ago. Acquitted."

"I missed it, I guess."

She was so quick, so warm, with her arms suddenly around me, her arms around my head.

"It's all right, then," I said.

"Yes, yes, darling. I'm so glad. Oh, darling, I'm so glad."

I stood up and it was like coming up after a long, deep dive in dark, cold water. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were wet.

"Jo, you're taking this harder than I am."

"It's because you were taking it so hard, Jim."

"I don't love her any more, Jo, you know."

"If you did, I'd probably hate her — if you loved her the way you love me."

"It was just —"

"Darling, I know. And I know why you were taking it so hard."

"Why, Jo?"

"Because you were sure she'd killed him. Will you make us a couple of cocktails — good strong ones?"

So she knew that too; yes, she knew that. But I'd never told her. I'd never told her about the night Polly came in tight with Pendleton and I was mad and said if she was going to be my wife, all right, and if she was going to be a tramp, all right too — but not as my wife. She went white with rage, ran upstairs, and came right down again with a revolver. I'd never told Jo how Polly had fired at me and missed.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **AGATHA CHRISTIE**

TITLE: ***Before It Is Too Late***

TYPE: Detective-Suspense Story

DETECTIVE: Hercule Poirot

LOCALE: Island of Rhodes, in the Mediterranean

COMMENTS: *Poirot perceived the inevitable shaping of events to come — for it was so definitely a case of "the eternal triangle" . . . that eternal design in the sands of human affairs.*

HERCULE POIROT SAT ON THE white sand and looked out across the sparkling blue water. He was carefully dressed in a dandified fashion in white flannels, and a large panama hat protected his head. He belonged to the old-fashioned generation which believed in covering itself carefully from the sun. Miss Pamela Lyall, who sat beside him and talked ceaselessly, represented the modern school of thought in that she was wearing the barest minimum of clothing on her sun-browned person.

Occasionally her flow of conversation stopped while she re-anointed herself from a bottle of oily fluid which stood beside her on the sand.

On the farther side of Miss Pamela Lyall her friend, Miss Sarah Blake, lay face downwards on a gaudily-striped towel. Miss Blake's tanning was as perfect as possible and her friend cast dissatisfied glances at her more than once.

"I'm so patchy still," she murmured regretfully. "M. Poirot — *would* you mind? Just below the right shoulder-blade — I can't reach to rub it in properly."

M. Poirot obliged and then wiped his oily hand carefully on his handkerchief. Miss Lyall, whose principal interests in life were the observation of people round her and the sound of her own voice, continued to talk.

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"I was right about that woman — the one in the *Chanel* model — it *is* Valentine Dacres — Chantry, I mean. I thought it was. I recognized her at once. She's really rather marvelous, isn't she? I mean I can understand how people go quite crazy about her. She just obviously *expects* them to! That's half the battle. Those other people who came last night are named Gold. He's terribly good-looking."

"Honeymooners?" murmured Sarah in a stifled voice.

Miss Lyall shook her head in an experienced manner.

"Oh, no — her clothes aren't *new* enough. You can always tell brides! Don't you think it's the most fascinating thing in the world to watch people, M. Poirot, and see what you can find out about them by just looking?"

"Not just looking, darling," said Sarah sweetly. "You ask a lot of questions, too."

"I haven't even spoken to the Golds yet," said Miss Lyall with dignity. "And anyway I don't see why one shouldn't be interested in one's fellow-creatures? Human nature is simply fascinating. Don't you think so, M. Poirot?"

This time she paused long enough to allow her companion to reply.

Without taking his eyes off the blue water, M. Poirot replied: "*Ça dépend.*"

Pamela was shocked.

"Oh, M. Poirot! I don't think *anything's* so interesting, so *incalculable* as a human being!"

"Incalculable? That, no."

"Oh, but they *are*. Just as you think you've got them beautifully taped, they do something completely unexpected."

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"No, no, that is not true. It is most rare that anyone does an action that is not *dans son caractère*. It is in the end monotonous."

"I don't agree with you at all!" said Miss Pamela Lyall.

She was silent for quite a minute and a half before returning to the attack.

"As soon as I see people I begin wondering about them — what they're like — what relations they are to each other — what they're thinking and feeling. It's — oh, it's quite thrilling."

"Hardly that," said Hercule Poirot. "Nature repeats herself more than one would imagine. The sea," he added thoughtfully, "has infinitely more variety."

Sarah turned her head sideways and asked: "You think that human beings tend to reproduce certain patterns? Stereotyped patterns?"

"*Précisément*," said Poirot, and traced a design in the sand with his finger.

"What's that you're drawing?" asked Pamela curiously.

"A triangle," said Poirot.

But Pamela's attention had been diverted elsewhere.

"Here come the Chantrys," she said.

A woman was coming down the

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beach — a tall woman, very conscious of herself and her body. She gave a half-nod and smile and sat down a little distance away on the beach. The scarlet and gold silk wrap slipped down from her shoulders. She was wearing a white bathing suit.

Pamela sighed.

"Hasn't she got a lovely figure?"

But Poirot was looking at her face — the face of a woman of 39 who had long been famous for her beauty.

He knew, as everyone knew, all about Valentine Chantry. She had been famous for many things — for her caprices, her wealth, her enormous sapphire-blue eyes, her matrimonial ventures and adventures. She had had five husbands and numerous lovers. She had in turn been the wife of an Italian count, of an American steel magnate, of a tennis professional, of a racing motorist. Of these four the American had died, but the others had been shed negligently in the divorce court. Six months ago she had married a fifth time — a commander in the Royal Navy.

It was he who came striding down the beach behind her. Silent, dark, with a pugnacious jaw and a sullen manner. A touch of the primeval ape about him.

She said: "Tony darling — my cigarette-case. . . ."

He had it ready for her, lighted her cigarette, helped her to slip the straps of the white bathing suit from her shoulders. She lay, arms outstretched in the sun. He sat by her like some wild beast that guards its prey.

Pamela said, her voice just lowered sufficiently:

"You know they interest me *frightfully*. . . . He's such a brute! So silent and — sort of *glowering*. I suppose a woman of her kind likes that. It must be like controlling a tiger! I wonder how long it will last. She gets tired of them very soon, I believe — especially nowadays. All the same, if she tries to get rid of him, I think he might be dangerous."

Another couple came down the beach — rather shyly. They were the newcomers of the night before. Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Gold, as Miss Lyall knew from her inspection of the hotel visitors' book. She knew, too — for such were the Italian regulations — their Christian names and their ages as set down from their passports.

Mr. Douglas Cameron Gold was 31 and Mrs. Marjorie Emma Gold was 35.

Miss Lyall's hobby in life, as has been said, was the study of human beings. Unlike most English people, she was capable of speaking to strangers on sight instead of allowing four days to a week to elapse before making the first cautious advance, as is the customary British habit. She, therefore, noting the slight hesitancy and shyness of Mrs. Gold's advance, called out:

"Good morning, isn't it a lovely day?"

Mrs. Gold was a small woman — rather like a mouse. She was not bad-looking — indeed, her features were regular and her complexion good, but

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she had a certain air of diffidence and dowdiness that made her liable to be overlooked. Her husband, on the other hand, was extremely good-looking, in an almost theatrical manner. Very fair, crisply curling hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, narrow hips. He looked more like a young man on the stage than a young man in real life, but the moment he opened his mouth that impression faded. He was quite natural and unaffected, even, perhaps, a little stupid.

Mrs. Gold looked gratefully at Pamela and sat down near her.

"What a lovely shade of brown you are. I feel terribly underdone!"

"One has to take a frightful lot of trouble to brown evenly," sighed Miss Lyall.

She paused a minute and then went on: "You've only just arrived, haven't you?"

"Yes. Last night. We came on the Vapo d'Italia boat."

"Have you ever been to Rhodes before?"

"No. It is lovely, isn't it?"

Her husband said: "Pity it's such a long way to come."

"Yes, if it were only nearer England ——"

In a muffled voice Sarah said: "Yes, but then it would be awful. Rows and rows of people laid out like fish on a slab. Bodies everywhere!"

"That's true, of course," said Douglas Gold. "It's a nuisance the Italian exchange is so absolutely ruinous at present."

"It does make a difference."

The conversation was running on strictly stereotyped lines. It could hardly have been called brilliant.

A little way along the beach, Valentine Chantry stirred and sat up. With one hand she held her bathing suit in position across her breast.

She yawned — a wide yet delicate and cat-like yawn. She glanced casually down the beach. Her eyes slanted past Marjorie Gold, and stayed thoughtfully on the crisp, golden head of Douglas Gold.

She moved her shoulders sinuously. She spoke and her voice was raised a little higher than it need have been.

"Tony darling — isn't it divine — this sun? I simply *must* have been a sun worshipper once, don't you think so?"

Her husband grunted something in reply that failed to reach the others. Valentine Chantry went on in that high, drawling voice.

"Just pull that towel a little flatter, will you, darling?"

She took infinite pains in the resettling of her beautiful body. Douglas Gold was looking now. His eyes were frankly interested.

Mrs. Gold chirped happily in a subdued key to Miss Lyall.

"What a beautiful woman!"

Pamela, as delighted to give as to receive information, replied in a lower voice:

"That's Valentine Chantry — you know, who used to be Valentine Dacres — she *is* rather marvelous, isn't she? He's simply crazy about her — won't let her out of his sight!"

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Mrs. Gold looked once more along the beach. Then she said: "The sea really is lovely — so blue. I think we ought to go in now, don't you, Douglas?"

He was still watching Valentine Chantry and took a moment or two to answer. Then he said, rather absently: "Go in? Oh, yes, rather, in a minute."

Marjorie Gold got up and strolled down to the water's edge.

Valentine Chantry rolled over a little on one side. Her eyes sought out Douglas Gold. Her scarlet mouth curved faintly into a smile.

The neck of Mr. Douglas Gold became slightly red.

Valentine Chantry said: "Tony darling, — would you mind? I want a little pot of face cream — it's up on the dressing-table. I meant to bring it down. Do get it for me — there's an angel."

The commander rose obediently. He stalked off into the hotel.

Marjorie Gold plunged into the sea, calling out:

"It's lovely, Douglas — so warm. Do come!"

Pamela Lyall said to him: "Aren't you going in?"

He answered vaguely: "Oh! I like to get well hotted up first."

Valentine Chantry stirred. Her head was lifted for a moment as though to recall her husband — but he was just passing inside the wall of the hotel garden.

"I like my dip the last thing," explained Mr. Gold.

Mrs. Chantry sat up again. She picked up a flask of sun-bathing oil. She had some difficulty with it — the screw top seemed to resist her efforts.

She spoke loudly and petulantly: "Oh, dear — I *can't* get this thing undone!"

She looked towards the other group ——

"I wonder ——"

Always gallant, Poirot rose to his feet, but Douglas Gold had the advantage of youth and suppleness. He was by her side in a moment.

"Can I do it for you?"

"Oh, thank you ——" It was the sweet, empty drawl again. "You *are* kind. I'm such a *fool* at undoing things — I always seem to screw them the wrong way. Oh, you've done it! Thank you ever so much ——"

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself.

He got up and wandered along the beach in the opposite direction. He did not go very far but his progress was leisurely. As he was on his way back, Mrs. Gold came out of the sea and joined him. She had been swimming. Her face, under a singularly unbecoming bathing cap, was radiant.

She said breathlessly, "I do love the sea. And it's so warm and lovely here."

She was, he perceived, an enthusiastic swimmer.

She said: "Douglas and I are simply mad on bathing. He can stay in for hours."

And at that Hercule Poirot's eyes slid over her shoulder to the spot on the beach where that enthusiastic

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bather, Mr. Douglas Gold, was sitting talking to Valentine Chantry.

His wife said: "I can't think why he doesn't come in . . ."

Her voice held a kind of childish bewilderment.

Poirot's eyes rested thoughtfully on Valentine Chantry. He thought that other women in their time had made that same remark.

Beside him, he heard Mrs. Gold draw in her breath sharply.

She said — and her voice was cold: "She's supposed to be very attractive, I believe. But Douglas doesn't like that type of woman."

Hercule Poirot did not reply.

Mrs. Gold plunged into the sea again.

She swam away from the shore with slow, steady strokes.

Poirot retraced his steps to the group on the beach.

It had been augmented by the arrival of old General Barnes, a veteran who was usually in the company of the young. He was sitting now between Pamela and Sarah, and he and Pamela were engaged in dishing up various scandals with appropriate embellishments.

Commander Chantry had returned from his errand. He and Douglas Gold were sitting on either side of Valentine.

Valentine was sitting up very straight between the two men and talking. She talked easily and lightly in her sweet, drawling voice, turning her head to take first one man and then the other in the conversation.

She was just finishing an anecdote.

"—— and what do you think the foolish man said? 'It may have been only a minute, but I'd remember you *anywhere*, Mum!' Didn't he, Tony? And you know, I thought it was so *sweet* of him. I do think it's such a kind world — I mean, everybody is so frightfully kind to *me* always — I don't know why, they just are. But I said to Tony — d'you remember, darling — 'Tony, if you want to be a teeny-weeny bit jealous, you can be jealous of that commissionaire.' Because he really was too adorable. . . ."

There was a pause and Douglas Gold said: "Good fellows, some of these commissionaires."

"Oh, yes, but he took such trouble — really an immense amount of trouble — and seemed just pleased to be able to help me."

Douglas Gold said: "Nothing odd about that. Anyone would for you, I'm sure."

She cried delightedly: 'How nice of you! Tony, did you hear that?"

Commander Chantry grunted.

His wife sighed: "Tony never makes pretty speeches, do you, my lamb?"

Her white hand with its long red nails ruffled up his dark head.

He gave her a sudden sidelong look.

She murmured: "I don't really know how he puts up with me. He's simply frightfully clever — absolutely frantic with brains — and I just go on talking nonsense the whole time, but he doesn't seem to mind. Nobody minds what I do or say — everybody

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spoils me. I'm sure it's frightfully bad for me."

Commander Chantry said across her to the other man: "That your Missus in the sea?"

"Yes. Expect it's about time I joined her."

Valentine murmured: "But it's so lovely here in the sun. You mustn't go into the sea yet. Tony darling, I don't think I shall actually *bathe* today — not my first day. I might get a chill or something. But why don't you go in now, Tony darling? Mr. — Mr. Gold will stay and keep me company while you're in."

Chantry said rather grimly: "No, thanks. Shan't go in just yet. Your wife seems to be waving to you, Gold."

Valentine said: "How well your wife swims. I'm sure she's one of those terribly efficient women who do everything well. They always frighten me so because I feel they despise me. I'm so frightfully bad at everything — an absolute duffer, aren't I, Tony darling?"

But again Commander Chantry only grunted.

His wife murmured affectionately: "You're too sweet to admit it. Men are so wonderfully loyal — that's what I like about them. I do think men are so much more loyal than women — and they never say nasty things. Women, I always think, are rather *petty*."

Sarah Blake rolled over on her side towards Poirot.

She murmured between her teeth: "Examples of pettiness, to suggest that dear Mrs. Chantry is in any way not absolute perfection! What a complete idiot the woman is! I really do think Valentine Chantry is very nearly the most idiotic woman I ever met. She can't do anything but say, 'Tony, darling,' and roll her eyes. I should fancy she'd got cottonwool padding instead of brains."

Poirot raised his expressive eyebrows.

"*Un peu sévère!*"

"Oh, yes. Put it down as pure 'Cat,' if you like. She certainly has her methods! Can't she leave *any* man alone? Her husband's looking like thunder."

Looking out to sea, Poirot remarked: "Mrs. Gold swims well."

"Yes, she isn't like us who find it a nuisance to get wet. I wonder if Mrs. Chantry will ever go into the sea at all while she's out here."

"Not she," said General Barnes huskily. "She won't risk that make-up of hers coming off. Not that she isn't a fine-looking woman although perhaps a bit long in the tooth."

"She's looking your way, General," said Sarah wickedly. "And you're wrong about the make-up. We're all waterproof and kissproof nowadays."

"Mrs. Gold's coming out," announced Pamela.

" 'Here we come gathering nuts in May,' " hummed Sarah. " 'Here comes his wife to fetch him away — fetch him away — fetch him away. . . .' "

Mrs. Gold came straight up the

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beach. She had quite a pretty figure but her plain, waterproof cap was rather too practical to be attractive.

"Aren't you coming, Douglas?" she demanded impatiently. "The sea is lovely and warm."

"Rather."

Douglas Gold rose hastily to his feet. He paused a moment and as he did so Valentine Chantry looked up at him with a sweet smile.

"Au revoir," she said.

Gold and his wife went down the beach.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Pamela said critically:

"I don't think, you know, that that was wise. To snatch your husband away from another woman is always bad policy. It makes you seem so possessive. And husbands hate that."

"You seem to know a lot about husbands, Miss Pamela," said General Barnes.

"Other people's — not my own!"

"Ah! That's where the difference comes in."

"Yes, but, General, I shall have learned a lot of Do Nots."

"Well, darling," said Sarah, "I shouldn't wear a cap like that for one thing. . . ."

"Seems very sensible to me," said the General. "Seems a nice, sensible little woman altogether."

"You've hit it exactly, General," said Sarah. "But you know there's a limit to the sensibleness of sensible women. I have a feeling she won't be so sensible when it's a case of Valentine Chantry."

She turned her head and exclaimed in a low, excited whisper: "Look at him now. Just like thunder. That man looks as though he's got the most frightful temper. . . ."

Commander Chantry was indeed scowling after the retreating husband and wife in a singularly unpleasant fashion.

Susan looked up at Poirot.

"Well?" she said. "What do you make of all this?"

Hercule Poirot did not reply in words, but once again his forefinger traced a design in the sand. The same design — a triangle.

"The eternal triangle," mused Susan. "Perhaps you're right. If so, we're in for an exciting time in the next few weeks."

M. Hercule Poirot was disappointed with Rhodes. He had come for a rest and for a holiday — a holiday, especially, from crime. In late October, so he had been told, Rhodes would be nearly empty. A peaceful, secluded spot.

That, in itself, was true enough. The Chantrys, the Golds, Pamela and Susan, the General and himself, and two Italian couples were the only guests. But within that restricted circle the intelligent brain of M. Poirot perceived the inevitable shaping of events to come.

"It is that I am crime-minded," he told himself reproachfully. "I have the indigestion! I imagine things."

But still he worried.

One morning he came down to find

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Mrs. Gold sitting on the terrace doing needlework.

As he came up to her he had the impression that there was the flicker of a cambric handkerchief swiftly whisked out of sight.

Mrs. Gold's eyes were dry, but they were suspiciously bright. Her manner, too, struck him as being a shade too cheerful. The brightness of it was a shade overdone.

She said: "Good morning, M. Poirot" — with such enthusiasm as to arouse his doubts.

He felt that she could not possibly be quite as pleased to see him as she appeared to be. For she did not, after all, know him very well. And though Hercule Poirot was a conceited little man where his profession was concerned, he was quite modest in his estimate of his personal attractions.

"Good morning, madame," he responded. "Another beautiful day."

"Yes, isn't it fortunate? But Douglas and I are always lucky in our weather."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. We're really very lucky altogether. You know, M. Poirot, when one sees so much trouble and unhappiness, and so many couples divorcing each other and all that sort of thing, well, one does feel very grateful for one's own happiness."

"It is pleasant to hear you say so, madame."

"Yes. Douglas and I are so wonderfully happy together. We've been married five years, you know, and five years is a long time nowadays ——"

"I have no doubt that in some cases it can seem an eternity, madame," said Poirot dryly.

"— but I really believe that we're happier now than when we were first married. You see, we're so absolutely suited to each other."

"That, of course, is everything."

"That's why I feel so sorry for people who aren't happy."

"You mean ——"

"Oh! I was speaking generally, M. Poirot."

"I see. I see."

Mrs. Gold picked up a strand of silk, held it to the light, approved of it, and went on: "Mrs. Chantry, for instance ——"

"Yes, Mrs. Chantry?"

"I don't think she's at all a nice woman."

"No. No, perhaps not."

"In fact, I'm quite sure she's *not* a nice woman. But in a way one feels sorry for her. Because in spite of her money and her good looks and all that" — Mrs. Gold's fingers were trembling and she was quite unable to thread her needle — "she's not the sort of woman men really stick to. She's the sort of woman, I think, that men would get tired of very easily. Don't you think so?"

"I myself should certainly get tired of her conversation before any great space of time had passed," said Poirot cautiously.

"Yes, that's what I mean. She has, of course, a kind of appeal. . . ." Mrs. Gold hesitated, her lips trembled, she stabbed uncertainly at her

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work. A less acute observer than Hercule Poirot could not have failed to notice her distress.

She went on inconsequently: "Men are just like children! They believe *anything*. . . ."

She bent over her work. The tiny wisp of cambric came out again unobtrusively.

Perhaps Hercule Poirot thought it well to change the subject.

He said: "You do not bathe this morning? And Monsieur your husband, is he down on the beach?"

Mrs. Gold looked up, blinked, resumed her almost defiantly bright manner and replied:

"No, not this morning. We arranged to go round the walls of the old city. But somehow or other we — we missed each other. They started without me."

The pronoun was revealing, but before Poirot could say anything, General Barnes came up from the beach below and dropped into a chair beside them.

"Good morning, Mrs. Gold. Good morning, Poirot. Both deserters this morning? A lot of absentees. You two, and your husband, Mrs. Gold — and Mrs. Chantry."

"And Commander Chantry?" inquired Poirot casually.

"Oh, no, he's down there. Miss Pamela's got him in hand." The General chuckled. "She's finding him a little bit difficult! One of those strong, silent men you hear about in books."

Marjorie Gold said with a little shiver: "He frightens me a little, that man. He — he looks so black sometimes. As though he might do — anything!"

She shivered.

"Just indigestion, I expect," said the General cheerfully. "Dyspepsia is responsible for many a reputation for romantic melancholy or ungovernable rages."

Marjorie Gold smiled a polite little smile.

"And where's your good man?" inquired the General.

Her reply came without hesitation — in a natural, cheerful voice.

"Douglas? Oh, he and Mrs. Chantry have gone into the town. I believe they've gone to have a look at the walls of the old city."

"Ha, yes — very interesting. Time of the knights and all that. You ought to have gone too, little lady."

Mrs. Gold said: "I'm afraid I came down too late."

She got up suddenly with a murmured excuse and went into the hotel.

General Barnes looked after her with a concerned expression, shaking his head gently.

"Nice little woman, that. Worth a dozen painted trollops like someone whose name we won't mention. Ha! Husband's a fool! Doesn't know when he's well off."

He shook his head again. Then, rising, he went indoors.

Sarah Blake had just come up from the beach and had heard the General's last speech.

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Making a face at the departing warrior's back, she remarked as she flung herself into a chair:

"Nice little woman — nice little woman! Men always approve of dowdy women — but when it comes to brass tacks the dressed-up trollops win hands down! Sad, but there it is."

"Mademoiselle," said Poirot, and his voice was abrupt. "I do not like all this."

"Don't you? Nor do I. No, let's be honest, I suppose I *do* like it really. There is a horrid side of one that enjoys accidents and public calamities and the unpleasant things that happen to one's friends."

Poirot asked: "Where is Commander Chantry?"

"On the beach being dissected by Pamela (*she's* enjoying herself if you like!) and not being improved in temper by the proceeding. He was looking like a thundercloud when I came up. There are squalls ahead, believe me."

Poirot murmured: "There is something I do not understand ——"

"It's easy enough to *understand*," said Sarah. "But what's going to *happen* — that's the question."

Poirot shook his head and murmured: "As you say, Mademoiselle — it is the future that causes one inquietude."

"What a nice way of putting it," said Sarah and went into the hotel.

In the doorway she almost collided with Douglas Gold.

The young man came out looking rather pleased with himself, but at the same time slightly guilty.

He said: "Hullo, M. Poirot," and added rather self-consciously, "Been showing Mrs. Chantry the Crusaders' walls. Marjorie didn't feel up to going."

Poirot's eyebrows rose slightly, but even had he wished, he would have had no time to make a comment for Valentine Chantry came sweeping out, crying in her high voice:

"Douglas — a pink gin — positively I must have a pink gin."

Douglas Gold went off to order the drink. Valentine sank into a chair by Poirot. She was looking radiant this morning.

She saw her husband and Pamela coming up towards them and waved a hand, crying out.

"Have a nice bathe, Tony darling? Isn't it a divine morning?"

Commander Chantry did not answer. He swung up the steps, passed her without a word or a look, and vanished into the bar.

His hands were clenched by his sides and that faint likeness to a gorilla was accentuated.

Valentine Chantry's perfect but rather foolish mouth fell open.

She said, "Oh," rather blankly.

Pamela Lyall's face expressed keen enjoyment of the situation. Masking it as far as was possible in one of her ingenuous disposition, she sat down by Valentine Chantry and inquired: "Have you had a nice morning?"

As Valentine began, "Simply marvelous. We —" Poirot got up and in his

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turn strolled gently towards the bar. He found young Gold waiting for the pink gin with a flushed face. He looked disturbed and angry.

He said to Poirot, "That man's a brute!" And he nodded his head in the direction of the retreating figure of Commander Chantry.

"It is possible," said Poirot. "Yes, it is quite possible. But *les femmes*, they like brutes, remember that."

Douglas muttered. "I shouldn't be surprised if he ill-treats her!"

"She probably likes that too."

Douglas Gold looked at him in a puzzled way, took up the pink gin, and went out with it.

Hercule Poirot sat on a stool and ordered a *sirop de cassis*. While he was sipping it with sighs of enjoyment, Chantry came in and drank several pink gins in rapid succession.

He said suddenly and violently to the world at large rather than to Poirot:

"If Valentine thinks she can get rid of me like she's got rid of a lot of other damned fools, she's mistaken! I've got her and I mean to keep her. No other fellow's going to get her except over my dead body."

He flung down some money, turned on his heel, and went out.

It was three days later that Hercule Poirot went to the Mount of the Prophet. It was a cool, agreeable drive through the golden-green fir trees, winding higher and higher, far above the petty wrangling and squabbling of human beings. The car stopped at the restaurant. Poirot got out and wandered into the woods. He came out at last on a spot that seemed truly on top of the world. Far below, deeply and dazzlingly blue, was the sea.

Here at last he was at peace — removed from cares — above the world. Carefully placing his folded overcoat on a tree stump, Hercule Poirot sat down.

"Doubtless *le bon Dieu* knows what he does. But it is odd that he should have permitted himself to fashion certain human beings. *Eh bien*, here for a while at least I am away from these vexing problems."

Then he looked up with a start. A little woman in a brown coat and skirt was hurrying towards him. It was Marjorie Gold and this time she had abandoned all pretense. Her face was wet with tears.

Poirot could not escape. She was upon him.

"M. Poirot. You've got to help me! I'm so miserable I don't know what to do. Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

She looked up at him with a distracted face. Her fingers fastened on his coat sleeve. Then, as something she saw in his face alarmed her, she drew back a little.

"What — what is it?" she faltered.

"You want my advice, madame? It is that you ask?"

She stammered: "Yes . . . Yes. . . ."

"*Eh bien* — here it is." He spoke curtly, trenchantly. "Leave this place at once — *before it is too late*."

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"What?" She stared at him.

"You heard me. Leave this island."

"Leave the island?"

She stared at him stupefied.

"That is what I say."

"But why — why?"

"It is my advice to you — *if you value your life.*" She gave a gasp.

"Oh! What do you mean? You're frightening me."

"Yes," said Poirot gravely, "that is my intention."

She sank down, her face in her hands.

"But I can't! He wouldn't come! Douglas wouldn't, I mean. She wouldn't let him. She's got hold of him — body and soul. He won't listen to anything against her. . . . He's crazy about her. . . . He believes everything she tells him — that her husband ill-treats her — that she's an injured innocent — that nobody has ever understood her . . . He doesn't even think about me any more — I don't count — I'm not real to him. He wants me to give him his freedom, to divorce him. He believes that she'll divorce her husband and marry him. But I'm afraid . . . Chantry won't give her up. He's not that kind of man. Last night she showed Douglas bruises on her arm — said her husband had done it. It made Douglas wild. He's so chivalrous . . . Oh! I'm *afraid!* What will come of it all? Tell me what to do!"

Hercule Poirot stood looking straight across the water to the blue line of hills on the mainland of Asia.

He said. "I have told you. Leave the island *before it is too late.* . . ."

She shook her head.

"I can't — I can't — unless Douglas. . . ."

Poirot sighed. He shrugged.

Hercule Poirot sat with Pamela Lyall on the beach.

She said with a certain amount of gusto, "The triangle's going strong! They sat one each side of her last night — glowering at each other! Chantry had had too much to drink. He was positively insulting to Douglas Gold. Gold behaved very well — kept his temper. The Valentine woman enjoyed it, of course. Purred like the man-eating tiger she is. What do you think will happen?"

Poirot shook his head.

"I am afraid. I am very much afraid. . . ."

"Oh, we all are," said Miss Lyall hypocritically. She added, "This business is rather in *your* line. Or it may come to be. Can't you do anything?"

"I have done what I could."

Miss Lyall leaned forward eagerly.

"What *have* you done?" she asked with pleasurable excitement.

"I advised Mrs. Gold to leave the island before it is too late."

"Oo — er — so you think —" she stopped.

"Yes, mademoiselle?"

"So *that's* what you think is going to happen!" said Pamela slowly. "But he couldn't — he'd never do a thing like that. . . . He's so *nice* really. It's all that Chantry woman. He wouldn't — he wouldn't — do —"

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She stopped, then she said softly: "*Murder?* Is that — is that really the word that's in your mind?"

"It is in someone's mind, mademoiselle. I will tell you that."

Pamela gave a sudden shiver.

"I don't believe it," she declared.

The sequence of events on the night of October the twenty-ninth was perfectly clear.

To begin with, there was a scene between the two men — Gold and Chantry. Chantry's voice rose louder and louder, and his last words were overheard by four persons — the cashier at the desk, the manager, General Barnes, and Pamela Lyall.

"You damned swine! If you and my wife think you can put this over on me, you're mistaken! As long as I'm alive, Valentine will remain my wife."

Then he had flung out of the hotel, his face livid with rage.

That was before dinner. After dinner (how arranged no one knew) a reconciliation took place. Valentine asked Marjorie Gold to come for a moonlight drive. Pamela and Sarah went with them. Gold and Chantry played pocket billiards together. Afterwards they joined Hercule Poirot and General Barnes in the lounge.

For the first time almost, Chantry's face was smiling and good-tempered.

"Have a good game?" asked the General.

The Commander said: "This fellow's too good for me! Ran out with a break of twenty-six."

Douglas Gold deprecated this modestly.

"Pure fluke. I assure you it was. What'll you have? I'll go and get hold of a waiter."

"Pink gin for me, thanks."

"Right. General?"

"Thanks. I'll have a whiskey and soda."

"Same for me. What about you, M. Poirot?"

"You are most amiable. I should like a *sirop de cassis*."

"A *sirop* — excuse me?"

"*Sirop de cassis*. The syrup of the black currants."

"Oh, a liqueur! I see. I suppose they have it here? I never heard of it."

"They have it, yes. But it is not a liqueur."

Douglas Gold said, laughing: "Sounds like a funny taste to me — but every man his own poison! I'll go and order them."

Commander Chantry sat down. Though not by nature a talkative or a social man, he was clearly doing his best to be genial.

"Odd how one gets used to doing without any news," he remarked.

The General grunted.

"Can't say the *Continental Daily Mail* four days old is much use to *me*. Of course I get the *Times* sent to me, and *Punch* every week, but they're a devilish long time in coming."

Douglas Gold appeared, followed by a waiter with the drinks.

The General had just begun on an anecdote of his military career in

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India in the year 1915. The two Englishmen were listening politely, if without great interest. Hercule Poirot was sipping his *sirop de cassis*.

The General reached the point of his narrative and there was dutiful laughter all round.

Then the women appeared at the doorway of the lounge. All four seemed in the best of spirits and were talking and laughing.

"Tony, darling, it was too divine," cried Valentine as she dropped into a chair by his side. "The most marvelous idea of Mrs. Gold's. You all ought to have come!"

Her husband said: "What about a drink?"

He looked inquiringly at the others.

"Pink gin for me, darling," said Valentine.

"Gin and gingerbeer," said Pamela.

"Sidecar," said Sarah.

"Right." Chantry stood up. He pushed his own untouched pink gin over to his wife. "You have this. I'll order another for myself. What's yours, Mrs. Gold?"

Mrs. Gold was being helped out of her coat by her husband.

She turned, smiling: "Can I have an orangeade, please?"

"Right you are. Orangeade."

Chantry went towards the door. Mrs. Gold smiled up in her husband's face.

"It was so lovely, Douglas. I wish you had come."

"I wish I had too. We'll go another night, shall we?"

They smiled at each other.

Valentine Chantry picked up the pink gin and drained it.

"Oo! I needed that," she sighed.

Douglas Gold took Marjorie's coat and laid it on a settee.

As he strolled back to the others he said sharply: "Hullo, what's the matter?"

Valentine Chantry was leaning back in her chair. Her lips were blue and her hand had gone to her heart.

"I feel — rather queer. . . ." she whispered.

Then she gasped, fighting for breath.

Chantry came back into the room. He quickened his step.

"Hullo, Val, what's the matter?"

"I — I don't know. . . . That drink — it tasted queer. . . ."

"The pink gin?"

Chantry swung round, his face worked. He caught Douglas Gold by the shoulder.

"That was *my* drink. . . . Gold, what the hell did you put in it?"

Douglas Gold was staring at the convulsed face of the woman in the chair. He had gone dead-white.

"I — I — never —"

Valentine Chantry slipped down in her chair.

General Barnes cried out: "Get a doctor — quick. . . ."

Five minutes later Valentine Chantry died.

There was no bathing the next morning.

Pamela Lyall, white-faced, clad in a simple dark dress, clutched at

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Hercule Poirot in the hall and drew him into the little writing-room.

"It's horrible!" she said. "Horrible! You said so! You foresaw it! Murder!"

He bent his head gravely.

"Oh!" she cried out. She stamped her foot on the floor. "You should have stopped it! Somehow! It *could* have been stopped!"

"How?" asked Hercule Poirot.

That brought her up short for the moment.

"Couldn't you go to someone — to the police —?"

"And say what? What is there to say — *before the event?* That someone has murder in their heart? I tell you, *mon enfant*, if one human being is determined to kill another human being —"

"You could warn the victim," insisted Pamela.

"Sometimes," said Hercule Poirot, "warnings are useless."

Pamela said slowly, "You could warn the murderer — show him that you knew what was intended. . . ."

Poirot nodded appreciatively.

"Yes — a better plan, that. But even then you have to reckon with a criminal's chief vice."

"What is that?"

"Conceit. A criminal never believes that his crime can fail."

"But it's absurd — stupid," cried Pamela. "The whole crime was childish! Why, the police arrested Douglas Gold at once last night."

"Yes." He added thoughtfully, "Douglas Gold is a very stupid young man."

"Incredibly stupid! I hear that they found the rest of the poison — whatever it was —?"

"A form of stropanthin. A heart poison."

"They actually found the rest of it in his dinner jacket pocket?"

"Quite true."

"Incredibly stupid!" said Pamela again. "Perhaps he meant to get rid of it — and the shock of the wrong person being poisoned paralyzed him. What a scene it would make on the stage. The lover putting the stropanthin in the husband's glass and then, just when his attention is elsewhere, the wife drinks it instead. . . . Think of the ghastly moment when Douglas Gold turned round and realized he had killed the woman he loved. . . ."

She gave a little shiver.

"Your triangle. *The Eternal Triangle!* Who would have thought it would end like this?"

"I was afraid of it," murmured Poirot.

Pamela turned on him.

"You warned *her* — Mrs. Gold. Then why didn't you warn him as well?"

"You mean, why didn't I warn Douglas Gold?"

"No. I mean Commander Chantry. You could have told him that he was in danger — after all, *he* was the real obstacle! I've no doubt Douglas Gold relied on being able to bully his wife into giving him a divorce — she's a meek-spirited little woman and terribly fond of him. But Chantry is

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a mulish sort of devil. He was determined not to give Valentine her freedom."

Poirot shrugged.

"It would have been no good my speaking to Chantry," he said.

"Perhaps not," Pamela admitted. "He'd probably have said he could look after himself and told you to go to the devil. But I do feel there ought to have been *something* one could have done."

"I did think," said Poirot slowly, "of trying to persuade Valentine Chantry to leave the island, but she would not have believed what I had to tell her. She was far too stupid a woman to understand a thing like that. *Pauvre femme*, her stupidity killed her."

"I don't believe it would have been any good if she *had* left the island," said Pamela. "He would simply have followed her."

"He?"

"Douglas Gold."

"You think Douglas Gold would have followed her? Oh, no, Mademoiselle, you are wrong — you are completely wrong. You have not yet appreciated the truth of this matter. If Valentine Chantry had left the island, her husband would have gone with her."

Pamela looked puzzled.

"Well, naturally."

"And then, you see, the crime would simply have taken place somewhere else."

"I don't understand you."

"I am saying to you that the same crime would have occurred somewhere else — that crime being *the murder of Valentine Chantry by her husband.*"

Pamela stared.

"Are you trying to say that it was Commander Chantry who murdered Valentine?"

"Yes. You saw him do it! Douglas Gold brought him his drink. He sat with it in front of him. When the women came in we all looked across the room, he had the stropanthin ready, he dropped it into the pink gin and presently, courteously, he passed it along to his wife and she drank it."

"But the packet of stropanthin was found in Douglas Gold's pocket!"

"A very simple matter to slip it there when we were all crowding round the dying woman."

It was two minutes before Pamela got her breath.

"But I don't understand a word! The triangle — you said yourself —"

Hercule Poirot nodded his head vigorously.

"I said there was a triangle — yes. But you, you imagined *the wrong one.* You were deceived by some very clever acting. You thought, as you were meant to think, that both Tony Chantry and Douglas Gold were in love with Valentine Chantry. You believed, as you were meant to believe, that Douglas Gold, being in love with Valentine Chantry (whose husband refused to divorce her) took the desperate step of administering a powerful poison to Chantry and

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that, by a fatal mistake, Valentine Chantry drank that poison instead. All that is illusion. Chantry has been meaning to do away with his wife for some time. He was bored to death with her — I could see that from the first. He married her for her money. Now he wants to marry another woman — so he planned to get rid of Valentine and keep her money. That entailed murder."

"Another *woman*?"

Poirot said slowly: "Yes, yes — *the little Marjorie Gold*. It was the eternal triangle, all right! But you saw it the wrong way round. Neither of those two men cared in the least for Valentine Chantry. It was her vanity *and Marjorie Gold's very clever stage managing* that made you think they did! A very clever woman, Mrs. Gold, and amazingly attractive in her demure Madonna, poor-little-thing way. I have known four women criminals of the very same type. Tell me this, please: what *evidence* did you ever have that Douglas Gold was in love with Valentine Chantry? When you come to think it out, you will see that there was only Mrs. Gold's confidences and Chantry's jealous bluster. Yes? You see?"

"It's horrible," cried Pamela.

"They were a clever pair," said Poirot with professional detachment. "They planned to 'meet' here and stage their crime. That Marjorie Gold, she is a cold-blooded devil! She would have sent her poor, innocent fool of a husband to the scaffold without the least remorse."

Pamela cried out: "But he was arrested and taken away last night."

"Ah," said Hercule Poirot, "but after that, I had a few little words with the police. It is true that I did not see Chantry put the stropanthin in the glass. I, like everyone else, looked up when the ladies came in. But the moment I realized that Valentine Chantry had been poisoned, I watched her husband without taking my eyes off him. And so, you see, I actually saw him slip the packet of stropanthin in Douglas Gold's coat pocket. . . ."

He added with a grim expression on his face:

"I am a good witness. My name is well-known. The moment the police heard my story they realized that it put an entirely different complexion on the matter."

"And then?" demanded Pamela.

"*Eh bien*, then they asked Commander Chantry a few questions. He tried to bluster it out, but he is not really clever. He soon broke down."

"So Douglas Gold was set at liberty?"

"Yes."

"And — Marjorie Gold?"

Poirot's face grew stern.

"I warned her," he said. "Yes, I warned her. . . . up on the Mount of the Prophet. . . . It was the only chance of averting the crime. I as good as told her that I suspected her. She understood. But she believed herself too clever. . . . I told her to leave the island if she valued her life. She chose — to remain. . . ."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Harry Kelly's "Nothing Is Black and White" is one of the twenty-two "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eleventh Annual Contest. For a "first story," it is unusually rich in atmosphere, and poetic in a dark and brooding way; you will find the suspense somber and chill — and perhaps unforgettable . . . The author was born in Chicago, and at the time he wrote "Nothing Is Black and White" he was just short of his twenty-ninth birthday. He served in Italy with the Military Police, and after the war got a B.S. in liberal arts from the University of Illinois where, for a short time, he was a graduate faculty assistant in the University's school of journalism. Later he became a reporter — a police reporter — for the Chicago City News Bureau, and when his "first story" was accepted by EQMM he was telegraph editor for the Joliet "Herald-News."

His only hobby, Mr. Kelly tells us, is writing. We think Mr. Kelly's hobby is going to pay off handsomely one of these days . . .

NOTHING IS BLACK AND WHITE

by HARRY KELLY

IT HAD BEEN A LONG CLIMB IN THE heat of the day and O'Mara stopped in the wooded pass to rest, leaning his bicycle against a tree. He slipped out of the straps and dropped the rucksack off his shoulders. He got out the water bottle and drank. As he had filled the bottle before sunrise, the water had lost its freshness; but he was very thirsty.

O'Mara was screwing the cap back on when he looked up and saw an Italian policeman coasting down the path, a rifle slung across his back.

He braked in front of O'Mara and nodded.

"*Buona sera.*"

"*Buona sera.*"

"You are an American?"

"Yes, I'm going up the mountain to take some pictures."

The policeman shook his head. "Stay away from those people. They are different — different from you and me."

"Different?"

"Yes, certainly. My father's family were from the mountains and the captain thought I could understand them, but I couldn't. They are people apart. You talk to them and it is like talking to the mountain itself.

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All you get in return is the echo of your own voice. It is maddening. I wash my hands of the matter."

"You've had trouble with them?"

"Trouble?" He rolled his eyes back in his head. "*Dio*, I don't even know. I ask questions like I was taught and they look at me as though I was the village fool. A man is dead and they shrug. Bah, I leave them to themselves — to their own law and to their own God. What else can a simple man do?"

He clicked his heels, climbed back on his bicycle, and shoved off. "I wish you good fortune and good pictures."

O'Mara came out of the pass, pushing his bicycle up the rocky path to the top where it leveled off. The air was full of sunlight, clear and clean, and unbelievably bright. Below were the deep shadows of the valley and beyond was the sea, hanging like a haze of autumn smoke between the trees and the sky.

And the wind swept in, sharp and chill, smelling of grapes, and making the trees sing.

Easing the rucksack off he took his Leica from the camera bag and moved along the path, stopping every few feet to peer into the viewfinder. The shadows in the valley were too deep. The colors would never come through on film. He'd have to wait. In the morning it would be fine. They'd make good pictures — good enough to sell.

O'Mara looked at his watch. Soon the sun would be going down and he'd have to find shelter from the cold. There was a town somewhere in the valley, but he didn't want to pedal back up again in the morning.

Then loose stones rattled behind him. A priest stood on the path with his black robes billowing around him.

"*Buona sera*, my son." He came forward and stopped before O'Mara, his hands tucked into his deep sleeves. He had a round, cropped head and dark, withdrawn eyes.

"*Buona sera*, Father. You have a fine view here."

"Yes. A gift of the Almighty. You are an American, a tourist?"

"A photographer, Father." O'Mara held up the camera. "I want to photograph the mountain. But it is too late now."

"Much too late," said the priest absently.

"You know about photography, Father?"

"Oh, no. I was just remarking that it is getting dark. You had better find shelter. It gets very cold this time of year."

O'Mara nodded. "That's what I was going to ask about. Is there a place here where I could stay? A village, a hut?"

The priest was no longer listening. He had turned to look down the narrow road that led into the valley. O'Mara followed the direction of the priest's eyes and saw them. There were four men, looking small from this distance, bent as they climbed with their burden — a long box that they carried between them. Now they

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moved from the square of light into the shadows, and O'Mara could hardly make them out.

The priest closed his eyes and fingered his rosary. When he faced O'Mara again his face was stiff and pale against the blue grain of his beard. "I am sorry. You were saying something? I didn't hear."

"Yes. I wanted to know if there was some place here on the mountain where I could spend the night?"

The priest shook his head and his lips moved. But the wind became loud in O'Mara's ears and the father stepped away as the wind howled.

"You had better go on," the priest said finally, shouting against the wind. "You don't want to stay here. Go down into the town."

"No," said O'Mara. "It is too far."

"Not really. It just looks far." His voice was lost in the wind's roar.

The four climbing up from the valley were growing larger and as they reached another band of sunlight O'Mara recognized the outline of the box and remembered about the policeman.

"You have a funeral, Father?"

"Yes."

"Today?"

"Yes."

"Isn't it rather late in the day for a funeral?"

The priest sighed and shrugged, tucking his hands back into his sleeves. "Here we sometimes have to do things differently. Differently from the way we'd like. . . . It is difficult to explain."

Apparently dismissing O'Mara, the priest moved off, mumbling, "I don't know. They really shouldn't expect me to. . . ."

"Father, about staying the night?"

The priest stopped and looked over his shoulder. "I've warned you, as God is my witness, but if you must — if you really must . . . Follow the path to the village. You can probably stay at the biggest house on the street. Not the villa, certainly not there. But at the biggest house. Tell them I sent you."

He disappeared among the trees, walking slowly with his shoulders bent as if he too were carrying a coffin.

O'Mara looked down at them again. In less than half an hour they'd be at the top. Suddenly the wind shifted and again the air smelled of grapes and autumn wine.

O'Mara swung his pack on his shoulders and pushing the bicycle, he followed in the same direction the priest had taken.

It was hard going, for the path was an old stream-bed, filled with large rounded stones that hurt his feet. He wondered how the priest stood it, wearing only thin sandals. Maybe it was part of his penance — if anyone believed in that sort of thing any more. O'Mara himself didn't know.

O'Mara trotted down a slight incline to the road that split the village. The houses, flat and dusty-gray, were built close to each other and opened on the street.

Nailed over each doorway was a

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cross or a painted sacred heart, usually hung with withered palms from last Holy Week. In a clearing beside the last house was the well, and women in black sat on the walls with their heads close together, waiting.

They looked up as he passed. But they didn't meet his eyes.

The villa, which the priest had mentioned, hung out over the village, a somber place even where the sun struck it — of dark stones and old trees and untended vines. . . .

He saw the wide, two-story house in the middle of the block. That must be the one that the priest had meant. The biggest one. At least it has windows. A woman stood in the door, looking out.

He took off his hat. "*Buona sera*, Signora." She had almost closed the door. She looked out again, holding the door open only inches.

"The priest sent me. He said I might stay with you for the night."

"You are not a policeman?" Her anxious eyes were lighter than her face and she pulled the dark shawl closer.

"No, I am an American. A photographer, signora. I will pay, of course."

She inclined her head. "Come in. Leave your cycle here. It will be safe."

He followed her through the dark hall, a breezy corridor of shadows that moved like heavy black drapes. A thin aging man with a fine, aloof face and long gray hair sat very close to the fire. He didn't look up until they stood in front of him. The woman spoke too fast for O'Mara to understand and the man nodded.

The woman glanced at O'Mara. "My father, Signore Perconte."

The old man spoke into the fire. "The priest told you to come here? We welcome you, of course. Please, be seated."

The woman retreated into a corner where the gloom hid the expression on her face. It was very quiet in the room. The only sounds were the breathing of the man and the snapping of the fire.

O'Mara shifted in his seat. He was very uncomfortable. "You have a funeral in your village, signore," he said.

The man's eyes moved. "What? Oh, yes. The funeral. Yes, we have a funeral."

Silence. Then O'Mara remarked, "I think I'd like to photograph it."

"Photograph it? I see. You want to photograph it."

The woman stirred in the corner.

"It is something you don't see every day," said O'Mara. "I saw them bringing the casket up from the town."

"The casket? Already? They must have hurried." The old man laughed deep in his throat. "They must be in a hurry . . . Maybe —"

"Father!" The girl spoke sharply and her father smiled. "Yes, you will certainly want to photograph it. Come, I want to see them bring the coffin. It will be something to see."

The old man let his daughter drape a coat over his shoulders. Then the

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three of them went down the hall and out into the street.

The four had just come out of the trees and were slowly marching diagonally across the road to the stone steps that had been set in the mountain and that led up to the villa.

Halfway up, the rear man — who was carrying most of the weight — stumbled and the end of the coffin hit the stones. They heard it all the way down the street where the women at the well looked up and crossed themselves in a white flurry of hands.

"I wonder if he felt that," said Signore Perconte.

"Father!"

"Is the body — is he in it?" asked O'Mara.

"No, of course not. It is just a saying."

The woman turned away and O'Mara felt foolish for asking. He should have known.

The wind spun down the alley made by the houses, blowing dust in their faces. The woman shivered and crossed her arms over her chest. "It is getting cold, father. Let us go in."

"Wait. Wait, I want to see if she lets them in. Watch the door."

The four had reached the top and they now rested the casket as one of them knocked at the door.

"Ah, see. The door opens," said Perconte.

The four picked up the coffin and went into the house. The door closed behind them.

"There." The man turned to his daughter. "Now we have to wait for the rest of it. Come, you are cold. We will go in. Later, after it is all over, we will drink and feast and be happy that we are still alive and that he is . . ."

"Father! For God's sake. You have said enough. Look, the priest."

He was striding up the road, appearing to skim the ground in his black gown. Two small boys were trotting behind him.

He saw them and stopped. Just when O'Mara thought he was going to speak the priest suddenly swung away and one could see the tight muscles working in his face.

He went up the steps two at a time, holding up the hem of his gown so that it wouldn't trail along the ground. They watched until he had gone into the villa.

"Let us go," said Perconte. He sounded very tired.

"I think I'll stay out for a while," said O'Mara drawing back. "I want to take some pictures of the village, in black and white."

"Black and white?" The old man looked at him, then put his hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Then your pictures will be lying. Nothing is black and white. Everything is gray . . . But as you will. We will wait."

The air cracked with the chill and O'Mara found his tweed jacket in the rucksack. With camera bag hanging from his shoulder, he crossed the street, passed the women who did not look up, and began climbing the hill behind them.

The light was fading fast and the

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wind rushed through the trees and numbed his hands.

When he was in the grove above the women he stopped climbing and took out his camera. From this height the women looked like big black birds, heavy from too much eating.

O'Mara worked carefully, choosing his shots well. He focused so that the women in their black shawls would be sharp against the blurred background, putting them alone, mourning for themselves and a world they were no part of.

He was happy with the pictures because they'd be different from the usual things one sees in magazines. There would be no laughter in them. And that was right.

Finally, when he was sure he had all he wanted, he began walking through the trees, back toward the villa. As he drew nearer he heard the sharp ring of steel on stone — *clink, clink* — like the tolling of a cracked bell.

He stepped out of the trees and the wind rushed in and surrounded him, cold and damp with the smell of grapes.

Two men were digging, waist deep in the hole, their coats drapped over a tombstone.

One, the taller, saw him and straightened, nudging the other.

"*Buona sera.*" They watched while he came up to them. "*Buona sera.* . . . It is hard work. The stones. You are the American photographer?"

The thick one looked at the tall one and winked broadly. "I never heard of an American who did not have a bottle, eh, Carlo?"

"No, I never did, Gino. It would be unthinkable."

O'Mara smiled and brought out the flask of brandy that he had purchased in Milano. He handed it to the one called Gino.

"Ah, *grazie mille.*"

Gino lifted the bottle to his mouth and drank with his eyes closed, enjoying it. Then he smiled at O'Mara and gave the bottle to the other, who bowed to O'Mara and raised the bottle to his mouth. He drank until the cognac slanted to the bottom.

"*Grazie mille.*" Carlo wiped his mouth with his sleeve and watched while O'Mara also drank, being careful not to clean the neck of the bottle first.

"That makes it better," said Gino whose eyes watered from drinking too much. "This grave will be a hard and cold bed for him."

"The grave for whom?"

"For Count Antolini, of course. Who else?"

"I didn't know," said O'Mara.

"Didn't know! I thought everyone knew. But you are an outsider. I forgot. I beg your pardon." He looked again at the bottle. O'Mara shook it and there was not much left, but he handed it over.

"Many thanks . . . You are staying with Signore Perconte?"

"Yes, the priest directed me there."

Carlo looked at Gino and they both shrugged. "The priest is a funny one."

"Yes, he certainly is, that priest.

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You never know about him, but he has been here very long."

"Very long indeed. He understands things. He knows about God's justice."

Gino cackled. "God's justice, huh!"

"You are an atheist. I don't know why I bother to even talk to you," said Carlo. He said to O'Mara, "He believes in nothing. He doesn't know about these things."

"What things?" asked O'Mara who finished off the bottle.

"God's justice . . . But you are an outsider and wouldn't understand even if I tried to explain."

Carlo lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the grave, looking toward the villa. "He was a very proud man," he said, almost to himself. "Too proud."

"You mean the count?"

"Certainly, the count. He's from an ancient family. And he was the last of it, unless his daughter marries and has a son. He might have died with an heir if he hadn't been so proud. She was ready to marry but the count wanted a count or maybe a prince for her. Not the man she chose. Certainly not the son of a common wine maker . . . Very sad. Now her mind is addled."

O'Mara was wondering if the brandy had gone to his head. "I'm not sure that I understand. You mean the count opposed the man his daughter wanted?"

"That is right." Carlo frowned. "You don't understand very well, do you? But you are learning. A little longer and you will almost understand as well as we do. Yes, the count even had her young man called into service. But when he came back into his uniform, looking very handsome, the daughter demanded and the count gave in. She was his only daughter — the mother had died at the birth."

Gino jabbed his shovel into the earth. "Stop gabbing, old woman. We have much to do and it is getting late. Soon they will be ready for the hole. You don't want the priest praying over your shoulder, do you?"

Carlo laughed. "You are right. We have much to do." He jumped into the grave and picked up his shovel. He grinned at O'Mara. "You don't by chance have another bottle, do you?"

"No, I'm sorry." O'Mara squatted on his heels beside the grave. "But finish your story. Did they finally get married?"

Carlo spit out the butt of his cigarette. "No, they didn't. He was gone on the eve of the marriage." Gino frowned. Carlo shrugged and tossed a shovel load of dirt at O'Mara's feet.

"You mean her fiancé?" asked O'Mara.

"Yes, certainly. Some say the count paid him to leave — gave him passage to America. Then, of course, others say differently. Anyway, he's gone."

"No one has seen him?"

"No, not for a year. And she was very sad. It affected her mind. I hadn't seen her since it happened — a year, as I said. Then I saw her yes-

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terday when I delivered the wine that the count ordered. She looked so thin and pale. Very sad, very sad."

"You saw him yesterday — the count, I mean?"

"Yes, that's what I said, wasn't it? He must have been very surprised by death and I imagine he hated it —"

"Carlo," snapped Gino. "Do you expect me to dig it all? You have talked enough."

"All right. You act as though it were your grave."

"One more thing," said O'Mara, getting to his feet again. "Who was the fiancé?"

Carlo looked up in surprise. "Perconte's son, of course. Who did you think?"

The wind roared in again. The coat waved like a flag on the tombstone. The men began digging very hard as O'Mara went away.

He climbed down over the rocks and the shrill wind hurt his ears and pricked his face.

The women were still waiting at the well.

Perconte's daughter opened the door for him. "It is almost time," she said. "My father is waiting."

The old man sat straight in his chair, holding a cigarette between thumb and forefinger, his coat still draped over his shoulders.

He smiled. "You are back. Good. We will have wine to warm us first." He looked at his daughter. "Clelia, bring us the wine. My wine, please."

Clelia brought the wine and three glasses on a tray. Perconte took the bottle in his hands. It was a long, narrow bottle with a green label. He took out the cork himself, twisting it with his long thin fingers.

"I make this wine myself. You will like it, I'm sure. It is the best in the region. That's why I put it in the best bottles, so the people will know they are drinking Perconte's finest wine, not some inferior stuff."

Perconte made a ceremony of pouring the wine, watching O'Mara's face as he drank. The wine had a sharp bite and O'Mara thought it was just as good as the old man had said.

"Very good," said O'Mara. "One of the best I have drunk."

The old man inclined his head. "*Grazia.* Now, let us go."

The village was waiting on the street for them. The men and women stepped aside to let Perconte and his daughter take the lead.

The procession moved slowly up the rocky steps with Perconte walking erect and proudly, looking neither left nor right, seemingly unaware of the drama or the people behind him.

The wind whistled high up in the trees and tore at their clothes. The wooden soles of their shoes clattered on the stones.

Everything is gray, as the old man said, thought O'Mara. The sky and the villa. Only the faces are white, very white against the black clothes. But mostly it is gray. O'Mara shoved his hands into his pockets. He felt strange and wished he hadn't drunk the brandy.

The villa door swung open and

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they paraded through the high hall with the cold marble walls.

At the end, against dark drapes, was the count's bier. And there were no flowers.

They probably couldn't get any at this time of year, O'Mara thought.

Big candles — almost as thick around as a man's wrist — stood at each end of the casket and on the tables around the room. That was the only light and the breeze from the open door kept blowing them out. A boy — one of the two who had trotted behind the priest — kept relighting the candles.

When everyone had crowded into the room and the door had been slammed shut, the priest came out from between the drapes. A boy knelt at his feet swinging an incense pot and the sweet smell spread through the room.

O'Mara had always disliked the smell of incense, but it seemed all right here.

As the priest took his position, a girl, tall and too thin for her white gown, glided through the front ranks, passing close to O'Mara, and stopped beside Perconte. A veil — white like a wedding veil — covered her face, and O'Mara saw only her eyes clearly.

Bride of death, he thought — then dismissed the phrase as too melodramatic. Melodrama always embarrassed him.

The priest's chant was punctuated by the tinkling of the boy's bell and was answered by the chorusing prayers in the room.

It was all over quickly. There was no sermon. The priest looked up and six men in dark, stiff suits lifted the casket carefully and hesitantly, as if each wished to beg the count's pardon. They marched out through the door, the village at their heels.

Then they were alone — the Percontes, the count's daughter, and O'Mara who was only an observer.

Perconte, who had waited patiently, lifted a candle from its stand and handed it to O'Mara. "Please, will you come with us?"

"But why?"

"You will see."

Perconte took another candle and bent to the ear of the count's daughter. They whispered, but O'Mara was not able to hear them. "All right," said Perconte. "Please follow us."

"I will stay here, papa," said Clelia.

Perconte looked at her and shrugged.

"If you wish."

O'Mara followed behind as the old man and the girl in white walked down the hall to the rear of the villa, through the antique kitchen. Perconte opened a door. The candlelight showed stairs falling steeply into darkness.

"We must be careful," said Perconte.

The wooden stairs were old and shook under their weight. O'Mara brought up the rear and the count's daughter was a white blur as she descended in front of him.

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At the bottom the walls were clammy, cold to the touch.

The girl hesitated and Perconte took her arm and urged her on with the soft sounds a parent makes to a child.

The light flickered on empty wine racks.

Perconte snorted. "So cheap he bought by the bottle! I'm sorry, my child. I spoke without thinking."

The ceiling was low and vaulted and O'Mara felt it closing in on him.

The footsteps whispered.

The tunnel turned and there in front of them was the door, heavy and solid-looking with iron bands.

O'Mara held both candles as Perconte gripped the iron belt and shoved; but it was stiff and stuck tight. He tried again, then shrugged. "I am too old, I'm afraid." O'Mara handed over the candles to Perconte. Then, using the wall for support, he kicked at the bolt, until it shot clear.

Perconte let out his breath. He pushed open the door. They smelled the stench that had been bottled up behind the door, in the tomb. The light flickered and was eaten up by the dark walls.

O'Mara followed around the edge of the walls to the corner. The old man stiffened. The skull smiled up at them. The light gleamed dully on tarnished military buttons and buckles.

O'Mara stepped back and left Perconte and the girl alone with their grief. He walked quickly back up the tunnel, past the empty wine racks, to the stairs.

He ran up and pushed open the door. Perconte's daughter half turned from the sink where she was pouring wine down the drain from a long, narrow bottle with a green label.

"It is sour," she said.

"I'm certain it is," O'Mara said politely and hurried through the big hall where the candles where still lit, and out the door.

Under the sound of the wind he heard the bell tinkle near him.

Then the priest came around the side of the villa, walking slowly with the wind whipping the robe around his bare legs.

"Father, I —" began O'Mara.

"You had better hurry," called the priest. "You had better get down the mountain before it gets too cold."

O'Mara hurried down the stone steps and got his bicycle from in front of Perconte's house. His hands were stiff from the cold.

He started down the road, hugging the side of the mountain, and the wind swept up and pressed against him, burning his eyes.

Then the wind died and he heard the church bells tolling behind him. For the dead, or for the living? O'Mara would never be sure.

That long, narrow bottle with the green label — the one Perconte's daughter was emptying — surely the count had drunk from it. Had it contained more than wine?

O'Mara would never be sure.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

J. Treloar Martin's "The Road to Tyburn" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest. It is that difficult and daring type of 'tec, the historical detective story — or, more accurately in this case, the pre-detective story. For the protagonist in Mr. Martin's tale is Barney Mudd, a Bow Street constable. The Bow Street Runner, you will recall, was England's earliest professional man-hunter; he represented law and order prior to the founding in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel of London's first official police force. Mr. Martin's story captures the flavor and historical interest of those earlier days of crime and crime-busting; indeed, the list of prisoners in "The Road to Tyburn" (save for Eastly's name) is drawn verbatim from the April 1745 issue of "Gentleman's Magazine."

The author was born in Sydney, Australia about 27 years ago. He is the son of the well-known Australian detective-story writer, A. E. Martin — as a matter of fact, it was the father who suggested that the son "scheme out a yarn" for EQMM. After leaving school, young Martin wrote for radio, then joined the staff of Tyrrell's bookshop in Sydney — "the mecca for Australian bibliophiles." After five years with Tyrrell's, Mr. Martin left Australia for England — "to take up writing as a full-time job." At the time he submitted "The Road to Tyburn," Mr. Martin was hard at work on his first novel — one, curiously enough, with an Eighteenth Century background.

THE ROAD TO TYBURN

by J. TRELOAR MARTIN

"GREED BREEDS MISTRUST AND there's many a goodly scheme been ruined by *that*," said Barney Mudd, the Bow Street constable, as he paced the floor with his hands tucked under his coat tails.

It was Tuesday evening and Barney's friends and neighbours were gathered in Mrs. Memory's parlour to hear his latest exploit. Outside the snow fell thickly, but within it was warm and cheery and pipe smoke wreathed the ceiling beams.

Barney was short and stockily built, with out-thrust jaw and stubborn eye. He was not a man to give

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up or be put off easily, which perhaps explained why he was Mr. Justice Fielding's most trusted officer in Bow Street.

He gave his coat tails a fillip and started on the story of what had happened on the road to Tyburn . . .

It was one of his duties to superintend the procession of criminals from Newgate prison to Tyburn gallows. These hanging days occurred once every six weeks and were enjoyed by everyone save the luckless wretches who occasioned them.

On the Sunday before the day of their hanging the prisoners attended the death-sermon in Newgate chapel. Barney went along to get a glimpse of his charges. They sat in an oblong enclosure in the centre of the chapel, round a table on which rested a large black coffin. The sermon was given by the chaplain, or ordinary, of Newgate — one Mr. Sam: Belcher, a gentleman ponderous in movement and speech.

While Belcher thundered religious platitudes, Barney glanced at his list of the prisoners and their offences. He read:

"Mary Cut-and-come-again (who would own to no other name), for a street robbery; Hester Fowler, for felony; Stephen Parsons, footman to Sir Simeon Stuart, for stealing his silver chocolate pot; Edw. Ryan, for stealing a silver tankard; Edw. Gilbert, a weaver, for the murder of Tho. Salter, his apprentice; Samuel Keep, for stealing a box of wearing apparel from the Bell Inn, Wood-street; Jack Eastly, for robbing on the King's highway; and Lettice Lynn, for felony."

He frowned at Eastly's name — frowned also at the bowed head of its owner. He could have done without a highwayman: they were always a nuisance on the road to Tyburn. Being popular figures they were feted by the mob. And remembering what he had heard of Eastly, Barney feared the worst. The highwayman's escapades on Hounslow and in Maidenhead Thicket had lost nothing in the telling and his extravagant style of dressing — even now he wore a scarlet coat with much gold lacing — had earned him the nickname of "Debonair Jack." Then there was the matter of the five thousand pounds in gold stolen from the Bath coach. The gold had never been recovered and Jack had boasted that he would carry with him to the gallows the secret of its hiding place — although he had added impudently that he would share the fortune with anyone who could save him.

Barney doubted if anyone would be fool enough to accept the bribe, but he made a mental note to ask for extra guards — just in case.

When the service was over he waited outside the chapel while the prisoners filed out, shuffling in their heavy prison irons. Parsons and Eastly seemed to have been deeply affected by the sermon, but the other prisoners laughed and joked among themselves, and one or two, recognising Barney, spat in his direction.

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"Incorrigible wretches — they have transgressed the borders of redemption!"

These words were uttered by the ordinary, who had come to stand at Barney's elbow. Barney looked thoughtfully after the line of prisoners.

"One or two of 'em seemed repentant," he observed.

Mr. Belcher nodded. "Parsons and Eastly — they at least will go to their Redeemer in a state of remorse."

Barney dug his hands in his pockets and pursed his lips. "Repentance don't seem to fit a man of Eastly's reputation."

The ordinary looked scornful. "A man who is brave behind a brace of pistols is seldom courageous when faced with the halter."

"Maybe," said Barney . . .

On the night before the day of execution Barney walked the route to be taken by the malefactors. Buttoning his great-coat and settling his weathered tricorne, he set out from Tyburn along Tyburn Road into Oxford Street. By the time he reached the Bowl tavern he was frozen to the bone. Prisoners on their way to Tyburn were allowed a last draught at the Bowl: Barney could think of no reason why he shouldn't take a like advantage of the tavern.

His entrance set the candles flaring. The men in the taproom looked up angrily and then fell silent as they recognised the constable from Bow Street. Barney took his tankard and stood astride the hearth. Gradually the silence was broken by fragmentary conversation.

A shifty-eyed servant carried a barrel into the room and then, at the landlord's instruction, came to tend the fire. Barney watched him over the rim of his tankard. Opie Screed was a thief and informer who could always be counted upon to turn King's evidence when his own neck was in danger.

" 'Tis agreeable to see you at honest labour, Opie," said Barney drily.

The informer jumped like a startled rabbit. "What d'ye want o' me, Barney Mudd?" he demanded.

Barney was struck by the note of fear in his voice.

"Man, what *should* I want o' ye?" he asked.

"Nought," said Opie surlily. "I'm an honest man, Barney Mudd. I tend the nags and help in here o' nights in return for food and a bed above the stables. You got no cause to badger me."

Barney wished he could be sure of that.

He continued his walk. In the length of Holborn he passed three pedestrians and one hackney coach. It seemed most people were content to stay indoors, and he didn't blame them. He was thankful when at last he passed St. Sepulchre's church, for that meant he was near the end of his walk.

Outside Newgate he heard the tolling of a hand-bell and a voice declaiming dismally into the cold darkness:

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"All you that in the condemned hold do lie,
Prepare you, for tomorrow you shall die . . ."

There was more in the same vein: it was the sexton of St. Sepulchre's delivering the first of the three exhortations that the prisoners would receive before they reached the gallows. The second would be delivered here at first light and the third outside the church wall in the course of the procession to Tyburn. Privately, Barney doubted if anyone — least of all the prisoners — derived much solace from the grim addresses.

A lantern drew near and he heard a strange sound which he identified as the sexton's teeth chattering with cold. In the lantern's feeble light he caught a glimpse of the unfamiliar features of a youngish man.

Barney passed the time of night and said: "You must be the new sexton," and introduced himself.

The other acknowledged the introduction, said his name was Holyday, and admitted that this was the first time he had delivered the exhortations. "And I don't take to it kindly, sir," he said plaintively. " 'Tis a bitter night to leave a warm fire to address men who, if I'm to believe what Mr. Belcher says, are beyond redemption."

"So you know the ordinary," Barney said.

"Very well, sir. In some measure I owe him my present appointment; he was very influential with the curate. But I don't know that I'm so grateful to him now. I'm chilled to the bone and dreading the thought of returning at first light to give the second address."

"Oh, well, if all our duties were pleasures we'd only have to atone for 'em in another life," said Barney, and thought virtuously of the credit *he* was running up in St. Peter's book.

On his way to Newgate next morning he saw many people gathered outside St. Sepulchre's. This congregation gave fair promise of what he must expect further along the route, and he was glad he had arranged for extra guards.

Inside the prison there was the usual confusion. The prisoners were in the press-yard room where the ordinary was gathering material for his confessions. After attending the prisoners to Tyburn he would hurry home and write up these confessions so they could be hawked on the streets before eight o'clock the following morning. The money he made by their sale was accounted one of his perquisites.

At length the prisoners — Parsons and Eastly abject with fear — filed out of the room to have their hand and leg irons removed. When this had been done they returned singly to the room for a few minutes of private prayer with the ordinary. Then they were conducted to the three carts waiting to carry them to Tyburn. Their coffins — and each prisoner had made it a point of honour to obtain one — were brought from the

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room and placed on the carts beside their owners and imminent occupiers. Finally Mr. Belcher came out carrying a large Bible and mounted the last cart with Eastly and the murderer Gilbert.

The procession started.

Winding out of Newgate it was immediately besieged by the waiting crowd. The prisoners exchanged ribald greetings with friends who had come to bear them company on their last journey. Barney, on horseback, rode beside the line of carts. He had given orders that the mob was not to be allowed to approach too near the prisoners. But he quickly foresaw that the small detachment of soldiers under his command would be no match for the mob if once the latter got out of hand.

At St. Sepulchre's the cavalcade halted. It was here the sexton was to deliver the final address. But it was the curate who poked his head over the wall and spoke to the prisoners:

"All good people, pray heartily unto God for these poor sinners who are now going to their death. . . ."

The great bell of St. Sepulchre's tolled a mournful accompaniment. The address concluded, the curate handed nosegays to the prisoners and, amid cheering, the procession continued. But Barney had found time to speak with the curate.

"I don't know *what* has happened to Mr. Holyday," the latter said in answer to his question. "I haven't heard a word from him to account for his absence this morning, although I believe he delivered the second exhortation at dawn as usual."

The cavalcade went along Giltspur Street into Smithfield, then turned sharp left down Cow Lane. In Holborn the crowd grew ever thicker and pressed ever closer upon the soldiers who marched beside the carts. There was much comment upon the dejected bearing of the scarlet-coated highwayman — upon whom Barney was keeping a wary eye. Outside the Bowl tavern the press was so great that the soldiers were swept aside and in an instant the first cart swarmed with people eager to shake hands with the condemned prisoners.

Barney put spurs to his horse but although the soldiers had succeeded in regaining control of the situation before he arrived, the damage had been done. Several burly fellows — who disappeared swiftly in the crowd — had broken one of the cart wheels.

For a moment Barney despaired. The procession already was late: it would be impossible to squeeze all the prisoners — *and* their coffins — into the two remaining carts: and to fetch another cart from Newgate would take valuable time. Then the landlord of the tavern stepped forward.

"My man tells me we have a cart in the stables that would serve in place of yours. If you give us time to unload it you are welcome to it."

Belcher, who had been listening, interrupted. "Excellent! Send the prisoners in the first two carts and leave the other cart to bring the coffins."

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Barney could see no objection to this scheme and gave orders for it to be carried out. The coffins were conveyed to the stables, the prisoners were organised into the remaining carts and, after a short delay, the cavalcade resumed its way.

There was a vast crowd at Tyburn. The public galleries were filled and the windows of the houses overlooking the scene held their quota of spectators — a solid mass of people surrounded the gallows. Ginger-bread sellers and orange girls drove a brisk trade. One man was selling the reputed confessions of Jack Eastly.

As the carts drew up beside the gallows the highwayman crumpled to the floor of his cart, which occasioned a roar of disapproval from the crowd, who had expected a good showing from him. Parsons was white with fear.

The hangman did not waste time. Soon seven of the eight prisoners had been turned off. Friends and relatives pulled their legs to hasten their end. Barney sat his horse nearby. He did not relish this aspect of his duty but he was not perturbed by it. Parsons made a bad end, struggling and crying pitifully and bringing upon himself the wrath of the crowd.

There remained only Eastly. The hangman grunted as he took hold of the highwayman's hands and prepared to bind them.

"Never think he'd worn irons, would ye?" he said and held up the unconscious man's wrists for Barney's inspection. The skin was unmarked by those scars inevitably left by prison irons.

Barney, who hitherto had been content to identify his prisoner by the colour of his coat, looked closely at the waxen features of the man in the cart. Recognition stirred at the back of his mind. Surely he had seen that face recently . . . and suddenly he realised that this man they were about to hang was not Jack Eastly the highwayman but Mr. Holyday the sexton of St. Sepulchre's!

He sent the hangman away and, oblivious to the hoots of the disappointed crowd, stood beside the cart and tried to think how the sexton came to be there. It was obvious that Eastly had escaped and his place been taken by the sexton. But where had the change been made? He himself had kept his eye on the scarlet-coated figure from the moment the cavalcade had left Newgate.

A sudden commotion interrupted his thoughts. A cart had drawn up beside the gallows. The cart was driven by Opie and carried the coffins which had been left at the Bowl tavern. Opie's eyes filled with sudden fear as he saw the body of the sexton and instantly Barney knew that the informer was involved in the disappearance of the highwayman. It took him only a few minutes to reduce the wretch to a state of quivering fear.

"He made me do it," Opie snivelled. "He knew something about me."

"Who d'ye mean?" Barney demanded.

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"The ordinary — Sam: Belcher."

Belcher's motive was instantly clear — the five thousand pounds in gold that Eastly had stolen from the Bath coach and had offered to share with his rescuer . . . Barney looked round. Belcher was nowhere to be seen and a sharp enquiry elicited the fact that he had left the gallows after Parsons had been turned off but before the sexton's identity had been discovered.

"Never mind — what did he make ye do?" Barney asked of the informer.

"It was he got me work at the Bowl. And this morning he made me help him snatch the sexton. We hit him on the head and when he came round we dosed him with opium and put him in Eastly's coffin that was carried into Newgate."

"And when Eastly was alone with Belcher for those few minutes after his irons were removed he changed places — and coats — with the sexton."

Barney's eyes were sparkling. "Go on, Opie ye slug!"

The informer swallowed. "Belcher paid three men to wreck one of the carts outside the Bowl. When the coffins were taken to the stables I let Eastly out and hid him in my room."

"Then likely he's there this minute?" Barney cried.

"Likely he is," said Opie. "And Belcher with him."

Barney waited to hear no more. Springing on his horse he pushed through the crowd. In Oxford Street he let the horse have its head and did not draw rein until he reached the tavern. He moved swiftly through the stables and up the steps to the floor above. Flinging open the door of Opie's room he presented his pistols at the astonished occupants — Jack Eastly and Sam: Belcher.

"Gentlemen," he said with a broad grin. "I'm sorry ye've had so much trouble for nothing."

When Barney had finished, Mrs. Memory sighed. "My goodness, such a man of action you are, Mr. Mudd! But what of Mr. Holyday? Has the poor man recovered?"

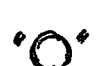
"Aye — a timely vomit did the trick," Barney said.

"And Mr. Belcher? . . . How that man's actions prove the truth of what you said! If he had had more trust in Jack Eastly he would have waited longer at Tyburn — and if he had waited he might have been able to warn the highwayman and escape himself when he knew the plot was discovered . . ."

"But he didn't wait," said Barney, "and must pay the penalty for his haste."

"Poor Mr. Belcher," said Mrs. Memory. "But perhaps he will find comfort in composing his own confessions."

"I doubt it," said Barney.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN B. STARR**

TITLE: ***Stroke of Twelve***

TYPE: "Western Crime" Story

LOCALE: Texas

COMMENTS: *At exactly high noon under a Texas sun Johnny Brown would have to walk down the alkali dust of Race Street and meet his sworn enemy face to face — and Johnny knew that Kilbain was too fast for him . . .*

JOHNNY BROWN STOOD THERE looking at the watch. The hands read four minutes to twelve. The bright Texas sun streamed through the doorway, cutting off his arm at the elbow, leaving the rest of his body in the dim shadow of the room. With a queer detachment he noticed the moisture in his palm, the slight tremor of his fingers.

In three minutes and forty seconds he'd have to go out in the street and face Kilbain — and he knew Kilbain was too fast for him.

He listened to the remorseless ticking of the watch and tried to let the sound drown out the remembered rasp of Kilbain's voice in his ears.

"I'll be walking on Race Street tomorrow noon — if you got guts enough to be around."

He heard a horse stamp nervously in the livery stable next door. Somewhere a woman was singing.

It reminded him of Mary. He tried to think of her, waiting for him to do this thing he had to do and come back to her. He tried to picture her face — and he couldn't.

Kilbain would be waiting too, at the other end of Race Street. Waiting for Johnny Brown to step out and walk toward him. Kilbain would be easy and confident and sure. This was a thing he knew. They would pace the length of Race Street until they stood before each other, staring into each other's eyes. Then Kilbain's body would droop; he would drop into that familiar crouch . . .

Johnny Brown put the watch on the table. His hands were moist and cold. He rubbed them on his shirt slowly, without conscious volition.

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Again the horse stamped in his stall and Johnny Brown had a moment of fierce protest. It puzzled him that out of this quiet town where he had spent his short life danger came, and fear, in the space of a few hours. Nothing could help him now — not his parents who pursued their safe, even lives unaware of this thing he was about to face; not his brothers who solved their own problems without help. Nothing that had happened to him here had meaning now.

There were other places, thousands of places with green hills and deep valleys and mountains with clear cold sparkling streams — there was the whole world in front of him. Why should he be forced to stay and face this thing? What stopped him from going through the back door? What would it matter? What did anything matter as long as he didn't have to walk down Race Street.

He turned into the shadows of the room toward the back door just as the church bells began to strike noon. The sound halted him. Each note was clear and distinct and the last one seemed to linger in the air and pull him against his will back across the room and out into Race Street.

The sun was hot on his back, yet his body was chilled and damp. Race Street seemed to stretch endlessly before him.

He began to walk forward, keeping his eyes fixed on the far end of the street. Kilbain was not yet visible.

He heard voices, which were suddenly stilled at his appearance. He knew that they were watching — his friends, his acquaintances, his enemies, perhaps even Mary. Queerly he resented this. What must be, must be, but the thought of those avid eyes angered him.

He began to walk faster, his feet kicking up small spurts of alkali dust. Far down the street Kilbain stepped into view. He stood an instant and then slowly commenced to move forward. Johnny Brown kept pace with him, lengthening his stride to match Kilbain's. He found himself counting the steps.

Kilbain grew larger.

They were fifty paces apart.

It was very still. There was no breeze, no motion except the crazy shimmer of the dust waves rising from the dust.

He could feel the cold sweat gather under his arms and roll down his sides underneath his shirt. He lifted his hands slowly and settled his belt around his hips.

He could see Kilbain's eyes now — close-set little eyes, narrowed to slits. Kilbain's lips were tight and pinched, his jaws set. A little muscle jumped continuously at his temple.

Twenty paces now.

They both walked like automatons, pacing evenly with the slow dignity of a funeral march.

Ten paces lay between them.

Then five — and Johnny Brown wondered if they'd ever stop.

Then in a fraction of a second — a segment of time so brief that it

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could not be measured — he knew that he couldn't go through with it. He knew that he would break, that he would drop to his knees and beg rather than face this thing. Fascinated, he stared for an instant into Kilbain's eyes, like a bird at a snake.

Then he half turned to run, one hand lifted, fingers spread talon-like — and Kilbain fell back a step!

Something he sensed rather than saw in Kilbain's face made Johnny Brown's hand stab out. His fist caught Kilbain on the point of the jaw. A ludicrous grimace of bewilderment and pain spread over Kilbain's face. Johnny hit out again, wildly, and Kilbain fell down in the dust, covering his head with his arms and crying, "Don't . . . don't!"

Johnny Brown stood there, chest heaving, trying to quiet the trembling of his knees, looking down at Kilbain in the dust, very conscious of the chatter of voices behind him.

His own voice when it came trembled just a little.

"Well, Kilbain, I guess you know who'll be carryin' Mary's books to school after this."

He brushed imaginary dust from his hands and turned away.

Johnny Brown was twelve years old and a man among men.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **J. M. STERN**

TITLE: ***Bedtime Story***

TYPE: Suspense

LOCALE: Eastern United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *When her husband Tom went to California on a new job, Valerie stayed behind to sell their house. It was lonely without Tom, and the nearest neighbor was a mile away . . .*

IT WAS DUSK OF A BLEAK NOVEMBER day when the phone rang. The man's voice said, "I'm calling about the house you advertised. Are you the owner?"

"Yes, I am."

Valerie went on to describe the house. She was eager to sell and explained her reasons: her husband's company had offered him a wonderful position in California, and she and Tom had decided to go west. He had to report there immediately, and she had remained to sell the house. "That is why I will sell at a most reasonable figure, so that I can join my husband quickly," she concluded.

Actually, Tom had wanted to turn the house over to an agent so that Valerie could accompany him, but she had insisted: "If you take the pictures off the wall and pick up the carpet, the place will look terrible. We ought to get at least fifteen hundred dollars more for it if I stay behind. You work so hard, I want at least to help with this."

Tom did not like the idea at all. Their house stood alone in a grove of trees on a hillside. The nearest neighbors were a mile away. He and Valerie had loved the quiet seclusion, the summer sun bathing, the fishing in the creek. But he was reluctant to leave her alone.

"Don't be silly, dear," she said, "I've been here overnight before when you've been out of town. I don't mind."

"It isn't a case of minding. I don't think it's safe. You read the papers; the world is full of nuts. It's bad enough for one night. But this may be weeks."

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"I'm glad you worry about me, but don't. There's the burglar alarm, and if anything's ever wrong all I have to do is phone Murray and he'll be here in five minutes."

He had argued, but finally she had her way.

The voice on the phone asked more details and then, "How do I get there?"

She gave the directions and asked when he would care to see the place.

"I have nothing to do this evening," he said. "Might as well drive out now."

She looked out the window at the gray sky and dark trees. Within a half hour it would be total night.

"Well," she said hesitantly, "the grounds and the view across the valley are the chief charm, and at night you really can't appreciate it. Why don't you come during the day tomorrow?"

"I'm taking a 9 o'clock train in the morning, and I'll be gone for a week. Might as well see your place before I go, so I'll be able to consider it. I know the countryside around your way and I can imagine the grounds; it's the house I really want to see."

So she had agreed to his coming, but when she hung up she had misgivings. During the day she had not hesitated to have strangers in the house. The doors were open; she was out of the house with them almost as much as she was in. The entire atmosphere was bright and unconfining.

But at night, alone in the house with a stranger, a mile from the nearest neighbor . . .

She stood by the phone and thought, I'll call Murray and ask him to come over. Then she decided not to; Murray would be sure to write and tell Tom she was frightened and then Tom would insist that she leave at once.

From the moment the young man entered the house Valerie felt uncomfortable. Her first impression was that he needed a shave. Then she realized that although he must be at least twenty-five, he had probably never shaved. Instead of a beard there was only a brownish fuzz, with a few straggly hairs indicating some sort of mustache.

But it wasn't his unpleasant appearance — his wet lips and his perspiring on this cool evening — which disturbed her as much as his ingratiating manner. He smiled all the time, *trying* to be pleasant. She wondered how this unprepossessing man, in stained, ill-fitting clothes, could possibly be a prospect to buy the house.

He was saying, "This is a lovely home you have," and she forced herself to show him around. But she decided that first thing in the morning she would change the ad. It had seemed brilliant at the time — *My Husband Left Me! — for a shiny new job in California. I am eager to join him and will sell our lovely country home at a sacrifice* — but now she realized it could be a come-on for the wrong kind of prospect.

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"What a beautiful view."

He was standing at the picture window looking out over the hills, which were barely visible now in the last dim light. He seemed truly appreciative, and for a moment Valerie relaxed.

But when she led the way to the second floor he did something that upset her all over again. She was partly up when she realized he was not following. She looked back. He was standing at the foot of the stairs watching her. She paused and asked, "Didn't you want to see the upstairs?"

"Of course," he grinned. "Go ahead."

She went up slowly. He watched her till she was at the top and then came up.

She remained in the hall, merely reaching into the rooms to switch on the lights. He spent considerable time in the bedroom admiring the decorations and furniture.

"May I?" he asked and opened the closet where her clothes were hanging.

She felt she had better go down, so she said, "When you're through, I'll be in the living room," but he said, "I'm through now." And on the way down he joked: "Does the lovely hostess go with the house?"

Again he stood at the picture window, which night had painted black.

"You don't have a nearby neighbor, do you?" he asked, and she decided it would be best to tell him, "We have a burglar alarm system. If any window or door is touched during the night an alarm sounds at the police station."

"Really?" He seemed surprised. But a moment later his face had that fixed smile again. "Actually," he went on, "If anyone broke in you'd hear it and could phone the operator. I noticed a phone at your bed."

"A telephone line is easily cut," she explained and then bit her lip in annoyance; "but if the alarm wire is cut, it breaks the circuit and sets off the alarm."

He was interested to know more, but she changed the subject after merely explaining that the main switch, in the kitchen, was always left turned on. When she retired, all she had to do was turn on the secondary switch in the bedroom.

"Ingenious," was his only comment.

He sat back in a chair. "I don't mean to be presumptuous," he said pleasantly. "I realize we have not been formally introduced. But it is such a pleasant evening, I would be honored if you would have dinner with me. We could go dancing."

The thought of his damp hands touching her — they must be damp, his face was — made her shudder; but she said, "You must forgive me, I have a great deal to do."

"I'll have you home early," he promised.

"You forget, I *am* married."

"That." He shrugged. "If you were my wife I would not leave anyone as beautiful as you and go three thousand miles away."

He crossed the room to her and was

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trying hard to be charming. He smiled into her face and asked, "What do you say?" She pressed back to the wall, quickly picked up the phone from the desk, and before he could react she had given the operator a number. He stood staring at her.

Then she heard Murray's voice and she said, "Murray, it's Valerie. Those papers you wanted from Tom — they're here."

At first Murray didn't know what she was saying, but she went on with her double-talk and in another moment he caught on.

"Listen," he asked excitedly, "is something wrong? Are you in trouble?"

"I don't know," she faltered.

"I'll be there in two minutes!"

She replaced the phone, gathered some papers, then looked up and explained, "I just remembered, my neighbor has been expecting these. He's on his way over."

"Sure," he smiled pleasantly.

The headlights came racing through the night and she hurried outside. The car tore into the driveway, screeched to a stop. Murray and Lillian, God bless them, tumbled out. Murray was in a bathrobe, with no trousers. The sudden relief, and seeing Murray looking so ridiculous with his bony knees and clutching his bathrobe, made her fall into their arms laughing hysterically.

Then she said she was certain it was nothing, she had suddenly felt upset, and she told them about the man.

Murray became incensed. "I'll throw him out!" he growled; but that wasn't necessary because at that moment he came out, thanked Valerie for her kindness, said the house wasn't quite what he wanted, and drove off.

Lillian exclaimed, "What a revolting looking creature!"

They insisted that Valerie spend the night with them, but she wouldn't hear of it. She was feeling sheepish and ashamed at her fright and refused to submit to it any further.

Finally they parted, laughing at Murray's bony knees.

Alone, she moved around the house locking doors and windows. This, she decided, would be her last night here. The extra money wasn't worth the fright. Tomorrow she would make the necessary arrangements and leave for California. But tonight she didn't feel like packing. She wandered around enjoying the quiet charm of the rooms in which she and Tom had found so much happiness.

About 10 o'clock she went upstairs, undressed, and got into bed. She sat up for a while, making a list of things to be done the following day, and then, just before turning off the light, reached over and switched on the burglar alarm.

It took a long time for her to fall asleep. She tossed about uncomfortably and at last fell into a fitful slumber. But something was disturbing her. There was something wrong that she should be aware of, something vital and imperative, but it

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kept eluding her. The feeling of urgency was great, as if her very life depended upon her learning quickly the hidden secret. It was tearing at her, and she gasped and groaned until suddenly she sat up, her eyes staring, a scream on her lips. *The alarm!* While she was outside with Murray and Lillian he could have pulled the main switch in the kitchen!

Her heart beginning to pound, she reached for the telephone. It was dead. She jiggled it frantically, then stopped. Her head bent sideways, she listened intently, but the house was as silent as it was dark. She slipped out of bed and hurried across the room. She stood in the blackness at the head of the stairs, listening and peering, and was about to descend when his damp hand brushed across her face . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	JOHN SAVAGE
TITLE:	*The Iron Box*
TYPE:	Suspense Story
PROTAGONIST:	Professor Katona
LOCALE:	Paris
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Janos Katona, a disciple of Houdini, was the most incredible escape artist of his time, and he faced his biggest test at the bottom of the Seine . . . an exciting cloak-and-dagger story.*

THE BOX WAS MADE OF IRON plates, welded together. It was two feet square and three feet tall. Empty, it weighed about 80 pounds. With Janos Katona inside and the lid bolted on, it probably weighed two hundred and fifty.

I first saw it in the lobby of a Paris theater. Later I saw it twice on the stage. Finally, in what I thought was a publicity stunt, I saw it thrown into the river Seine by a group of Katona's admirers. I never saw it again.

Those are the main facts of the matter, and yet they leave out almost everything. The story of Janos Katona — the finest and most truly dedicated man I've ever met — deserves to be known on the American side of the ocean. I think I should be the one to tell it, because Katona and his iron box changed my whole life.

I was twenty-four years old that November. Except for a very bad conscience, which had been my companion ever since I had quit my New York job, I was alone in Paris. The first Katona poster I saw was on a newspaper kiosk near the Madeleine at 7 o'clock one evening.

I have always been a sucker for any kind of magician or escape artist. This one was billed as *Katona, l'incroyable*, which means "Katona, you wouldn't believe it." I was prepared to believe it, all right. I was, and still am, the perfect audience for all performers of that kind; I am a man who takes a childish delight in everything they do, tries his damnedest

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to find out how they do it, and never succeeds.

I immediately started walking toward the theater, and I paused only once. The pause came when I saw my second Katona poster. It was on another kiosk, about two-thirds of the way to the theater. This poster was like the first, except that it had been defaced in a very significant way. Somebody, working fast, had splashed across it in red paint. The word was *paix*.

I knew about the special meaning of that word. You couldn't spend much time in Europe without learning about it, and you were always seeing it painted on a bridge or a wall somewhere. In Italy you saw *pace*, and in Germany it was *Friede*, but everywhere it was a motto of the Communists. It had once been a well-loved word meaning simply "peace," but the Communists had captured it and taught it new tricks.

Here and now, splashed diagonally across Katona's name, the word did not mean "peace." It meant something like "down with the enemies of Communism," and its message was perfectly clear. Every passer-by would learn what I was learning — that this man Katona was hated by the Reds.

I absorbed the message with interest and then walked on toward the theater. There had been a time when the conquest of "peace" by the word-twisters was capable of making me fighting mad, but that time was past. I had come a long way, or thought I had, since the days when I hoped to do something about the mess the world was in.

I arrived at the theater ten minutes early, still wondering idly how an innocent escape artist could have got the Communists mad at him. As soon as I entered the lobby, though, I turned my mind to more fascinating matters.

The display in the lobby that night included many objects besides the iron box. There were two strait jackets, a heavy steamer trunk, a cluster of handcuffs, and various other devices that Professor Katona proposed to escape from, for the entertainment and mystification of the public. I set about examining all these exhibits carefully, and so did several other customers who had come in just ahead of me.

I saved the iron box until the last, because it appealed to me most. A steamer trunk might easily be rigged with a panel that opened inward at the touch of a hidden spring. A strait jacket could be unbuckled, by a trained contortionist, through the canvas. Cheap handcuffs would pop open if you banged them on something, and many better cuffs would be unlocked with a looped shoelace. But a simple metal box without upholstery, without any rivets, phony or otherwise . . .

I stood in front of the box and looked at it. It was empty; the big square lid was on the floor nearby. The box had once been painted white, inside and out, but apparently

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not for the purpose of hiding anything. There were, in fact, several irregular spots where the paint was scaling off and the rust was working. From each of these areas a long, orange-red stain ran downward on the white surface.

I hit the side of the box a few times with the heel of my hand, and each time there was a muffled boom. The box sounded very solid. I quickly turned my attention to the lid and the fastenings.

The lid, which was also painted white, lay upside down on the floor. It was a two-foot square of sheet iron with sides about three inches high all the way around. I picked it up, turned it over, and fitted it onto the box. It slid snugly down over the open end like the cover on a can of tea.

It was only after the lid was on that I noticed the holes. There were two of them, and they were drilled through opposite side walls of the lid. They went right on through the walls of the box itself. Any kind of rod, stuck through the holes, would secure the lid.

I took the lid off and put it back on the floor. I was now being watched politely by an old Frenchman in overcoat, muffler, and beret, and also by his wife. They seemed to think I was part of the show. I grinned at them and went on with my investigation. I was having so much fun that I even forgot my nagging conscience.

I was absolutely satisfied with the box and the lid. I figured the trick for escaping must lie in some hidden weakness of the bolts and locks that held the two together. I therefore spent the rest of the time before the show in examining the bolts and locks, and in studying the drawing that showed how they worked.

The drawing was in an oak frame, leaning against the box. It showed a cutaway view, with a man in the box and the fastening in place. The lid was held down, at opposite sides, by two bolts. The heads of these bolts were inside the box, and the shaft of them ran out through the holes that were drilled through the side walls of the box and the side walls of the cover. Instead of a nut on the outside end of each bolt, there was a hole drilled through the bolt itself. Through each hole was passed the hasp of a sizable padlock. A man locked in the box had nothing to attack but the smooth heads of the bolts. What could he do?

He could use trick bolts, with heads that would unscrew. Sure. And when the heads were off, he could simply push the headless bolts on out.

The bolts, with their locks, were on the floor beside the drawing. Several other people had joined the old Frenchman and his wife in watching me, but I didn't care. I started trying to unscrew the heads of the bolts.

I was still trying five minutes later, when the warning buzzer sounded several times.

I walked on in and sat down, followed by my own small audience. My hands were sore from trying to twist

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the boltheads, but I was feeling stubbornly sure of my theory. I smiled and said to myself: They'll switch bolts before the show.

The surprises of that evening, though it was nearly a month ago and in another country, are still vivid in my memory as I write. The biggest surprise, even before I learned the whole truth about him, was Janos Katona himself — first his humor and lack of bombast, later his consummate skill.

He came out on the bare stage, alone, and stood there smiling modestly while the audience gave him a round of applause. I judged that he was just under forty years old. He was a blond man of medium size with extremely powerful shoulders. He wore a black suit and a bow tie.

As soon as the applause died down, he made an extraordinary speech, in heavily accented French. I had expected the accent, in view of his Hungarian name, but I had not expected the content of the speech.

"I am only an imitator," he began. "You will see nothing tonight that has not been done better before, even by men who were also imitators." He smiled ruefully, and I could feel his audience warming up to him, although his sincere modesty was not what I would have thought of as good showmanship. "If any of my little *divertissements* should give you pleasure," he went on, "please remember that your pleasure comes not from me but from a great man who died many years ago. This was the American, Ehrich Weiss, known to the world as Houdini."

The audience clapped again, and Katona — with Houdini off his chest — started doing his stuff. Within two minutes I was in the act myself.

An escape act is a curious thing, and the heart and soul of it is showmanship. The build-up has to be superb, because the best escapes are made behind a screen of some kind, to protect the secret. The climax of the act takes place where the audience can't even see it.

Houdini, they say, could hold a theaterful in eager suspense for an hour or more while he worked himself out of some elaborate pickle, within the four walls of a portable screen. But I hadn't thought, until I saw Katona, that anybody else could create that kind of interest.

He began by asking for a committee of five men from the audience, much as Houdini used to do. Although I am not an exhibitionist by nature, I was on the stage in ten seconds. I wanted to know, above all, about the iron-box trick. I wanted to check those bolts.

The first of the committee's duties was to help the magician carry his equipment from the lobby to the stage. Apparently Katona worked without an assistant. The band played while we made the trip to the lobby and back, and I got several close looks at Katona's face. It was a strong, likable face, with a lot of experience in it.

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As soon as we got back on the stage and got things arranged, Katona began a series of stunts, most of which I'd seen before. He let the five-man committee stay on the stage, to prove he had nothing to hide. We sat in straight chairs, all on one side of the stage, and watched him run through some preliminary sleights of hand. The escapes, since they were the main dish, would come later.

He swallowed a handful of needles and a ball of thread, then pulled the thread out of his mouth with the needles strung on it; he did some card tricks; he made a rosebush grow and blossom out of an empty flowerpot. All this was done rather apologetically, but it was expert work and quite convincing.

I enjoyed these things, along with the rest of the audience, but I was waiting somewhat impatiently for the escape from the iron box. It had occurred to me by now that he might use imitation padlocks made of sponge rubber; then he could pull the bolts in through the holes, locks and all. I resolved to be one of the committeemen who locked him in. I'd find out for sure.

When he finally got to the escapes, he began with the strait jacket. All the members of the committee helped get it on him. He had taken off his coat first, so that we could get the leather-and-canvas contraption on tighter. We buckled the jacket up the back, then made him cross his arms on his chest while we buckled the ends of the sleeves together, also in back. We pulled everything taut, and when we were finished it was a wonder that Katona could even breathe.

He stood before us for a moment, and I thought I caught a certain look of watchfulness in his eyes. I suddenly remembered the messed-up poster outside, and realized something I'd been forgetting: Katona was a man who had powerful enemies. It must take a fair amount of courage for him to let himself be rendered helpless by strangers, even here in the theater.

He smiled, though, and proceeded to order something I had never seen done before. He had us hang him upside down by the ankles, from a rope that ran over a pulley in the flies. Three of us got on the free end of the rope and hauled until Katona hung, head downward, two yards off the floor. Then he asked us to start him swinging from side to side, and we did. He kept shouting for more until we had him going in a long arc, the whole width of the stage.

I had read somewhere about the strait-jacket work of Houdini himself. He always claimed that this particular escape was a matter of "persistent straining" by a man with a well-trained body; not a secret trick at all, in other words, but something that could be done in full view of the audience.

I had carefully inspected Katona's strait jacket. I had checked especially for hidden springs or releases inside the ends of the sleeves. I knew there weren't any.

Still swinging in that long arc, Ka-

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tona gradually pulled one elbow over his head, wriggled the jacket around on his body, unbuckled the sleeve straps with his teeth, and then unbuckled the jacket straps with his hands, working through the canvas. He dropped the jacket on the floor after about a minute and a half. Then he jackknifed his body, untied his own ankles and swung off the rope. He hit the stage standing up, and the crowd went crazy.

The handcuff act which followed was also impressive, and so was the escape from the steamer trunk. But I was getting a little impatient for the iron-box performance. My chief interest in the steamer-trunk escape came from the prospect of seeing what type of screen Katona would use.

The screen turned out to be a steel frame, six feet square, with blue drapes that hung down to the floor on all four sides. The frame was on wheels, so that it could be rolled into place. After we had Katona locked in the trunk and the trunk bound securely with rope, according to the instructions he had given, we rolled the screen over the trunk, hiding it from view. In less than a minute, Katona parted the curtains and stepped out. We rolled the screen away and found the trunk securely locked and tied.

This made an excellent act, but I'd heard of too many ways for getting out of a trunk: trap doors, trick hinges.

The iron box was next, though, and I began to get really excited. Only those who share my love of magic will know completely what I mean: the utter simplicity of the box, the complete perfection of the illusion!

We members of the committee, with the help of Janos Katona himself, cleared the stage of everything except the box. Then Katona invited the committee to make another inspection.

I jumped at the chance. I went straight to the bolts and tried to unscrew the heads, without success. I squeezed the locks and found them solid. If there was to be a switch of some kind, it hadn't been pulled yet. I gave the box and lid another quick check and was convinced that nothing had been changed.

Katona held his arms out and asked us to search him. All five of us took turns with the frisking, and nothing turned up. At first I wondered about the reason for the search. It was only after he had stepped into the box that I understood.

This was the way of it: Janos Katona stepped into the open box and folded himself into a sitting position, with the two bolts in his hands; his knees were almost against his chest. As soon as he was in, he pushed the bolts out through the two holes in the box, which were about on a level with the top of his head. He pushed the bolts only part of the way, so that they would not interfere with the lid as it slid past them. He kept his hands on the bolts, and as soon as we had slid the lid on, he pushed the bolts as

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far out as they would go, through the two holes.

As the committeemen snapped the padlocks through the holes in the ends of the bolts, my brain began to work on the only possibility I could see for escape: the bolts had not been switched while Katona was visible, but couldn't he have switched them after he was hidden by the lid?

No, I decided, not unless he could make time stand still. The bolts had shot out of both holes at once, the very instant the lid was all the way down. And where would the substitute bolts have come from, anyway? Five men had just searched him. I saw the reason for the search now, and I admired it. In insisting on that detail, Janos Katona had been shoring up the only weak spot in his illusion. All logical possibilities of escape had now been eliminated.

We rolled the screen over the box, as we had rolled it over the trunk. The folds of the blue cloth curtain dropped to the floor all the way around the box, hiding it completely.

The orchestra played very loudly for the next two minutes. I registered that fact as a suspicious detail, without knowing how to interpret it. In less than two minutes the blue curtains parted.

Katona stepped out, smiling rather humbly. He gave the screen a push, and it rolled away, revealing the iron box. The box was bolted and locked as it had been before.

The audience got to its feet and did a lot of clapping. I sat there, beating my hands together and trying to figure out the gimmick. When the applause was over, Katona allowed the committee to unlock the padlocks, push the bolts into the box, and remove the lid. Everything was as before. With Katona smiling at me, I reached into the box, retrieved the bolts, and tried to twist the heads off. No luck.

Katona then asked the audience, as Houdini used to do, if anybody had a challenge — any particularly difficult test he'd like to put the magician to. Nobody spoke up, so Katona did a couple of card tricks, dismissed the committee, and rang down the curtain.

That was Friday night. I went to my hotel as soon as the show was over, had a drink in the bar, and went to bed. I dreamed of being shut up in an iron box, a huge one, and I woke up in the morning knowing I'd have to find out more about that trick. Maybe if I went back to the theater that night, I'd get a chance to talk to the magician a little.

In that morning's Paris *Herald*, which I read at breakfast, I was delighted to find a feature story on the new sensation in town, Janos Katona. There was no specific mention of the iron box, though. Instead, there was a picture of Katona, looking very serious, and a brief account of what the paper called "the crowning escape of his career" — his trip from Communist Budapest to the American zone of Vienna six months before. It

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seemed he had not been popular with the political leaders on the other side of the Curtain. He had been engaged in a lot of anti-Soviet pamphleteering, and his escape from prison, while he was awaiting interrogation, was said to have vexed the authorities considerably.

Those same authorities, the story said, were angry at him for an additional reason: they believed that most of his theatrical income, even now, was being used to help finance anti-Communist elements in Hungary.

I found this very good reading, but I reminded myself that I had given up all interest in international affairs on the day I quit my job at United Nations headquarters in New York. All I wanted to know, I told myself, was how Katona got out of that confounded iron box.

I arrived at the theater about twenty minutes before curtain time that night and spent the twenty minutes investigating the box all over again. I got nowhere.

When the show started, I volunteered for the committee again. Katona did a slight double-take when he saw me, but he seemed pleased to be doing repeat business and readily agreed to allow me to serve.

While we were carrying the box from the lobby to the stage, he asked me a question: "You are American?"

I said, "Yes," and then I tried something. "I wonder if I could buy you a drink after the show?" I asked.

He grinned. "Not only an American, but a rich American! Hokay! Do you know La Petite Marmite?"

I said I did, and we agreed to meet there. It was a bar near the theater.

The show that night began with everything going off exactly as before. Things didn't begin to be different until after the iron-box trick, when Katona asked again for challenges from the audience.

This time a man stood up and shouted, "Yes! If you please, yes. *I* have a challenge!"

This man was far in the rear of the house. All I could tell about him was that his face, behind heavy spectacles and a gray mustache, was very white. Katona smiled at him and seemed to take a new interest in the proceedings. "Monsieur will have the goodness to state his challenge," he called. "My talents are, as will have been noted by all, severely limited. At the same time . . ." He paused and waited.

The man in the rear spoke again, rather stiffly, and in an accent that reminded me oddly of Katona's own. He ticked off each detail on his fingers. "Tomorrow, in the full light of day, on the Quai d'Orsay, *Monsieur le Professeur* will enter the iron box. The committee will secure the cover as before. The box will be carried by the committee to the water's edge." He paused. "It will be thrown into the Seine."

The man sat down. There was a gasp from the audience. This was followed by laughter from those who had not caught the desperate seriousness of the challenger's tone, and by

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shocked cries of "*Non!*" from those who had.

Katona was still smiling. That confident smile, along with the challenger's Hungarian accent, forced me to an obvious conclusion: the challenger was a friend. This was a put-up job, for publicity purposes.

"Is it your intention, monsieur," Katona called, "that I should attempt an underwater escape, in the manner of the incomparable Houdini?"

"This intention is obvious."

"Not quite obvious," Katona corrected politely. "I would enjoy making such an attempt, but" — and he paused — "it is my opinion that the box, alas, might float."

I did some quick figuring, and realized that he was right. Even with a man inside, the box would contain several cubic feet of air.

The challenger spoke again, rather acidly. "Weight it."

Katona thought for a moment, then nodded. "This solution is acceptable to me," he said. "I shall place lead weights in the box before I enter it."

The challenger said, "*D'accord!*" and nodded triumphantly.

Katona dismissed the committee. With a sure appreciation of climax and anticlimax, he omitted the card tricks of the night before. He simply said, "Until tomorrow, Quai d'Orsay, at ten."

The audience was almost too busy with buzzing speculations to give him a hand.

I went straight to La Petite Marmite. I wasn't sure Katona would remember the appointment, but he did. He joined me just as I was sitting down at a rear table. I introduced myself and then summoned the waiter. Katona ordered a *filtre*, and I ordered some of the Normandy applejack they call Calvados. There was a moment of silence, during which I happened to notice Katona's suit.

He had done a quick change since the show, and he was wearing a blue flannel suit that belonged in a rag bag. For a second I wondered why he couldn't afford new clothes, and then I remembered that his income was said to be going to the Hungarian underground.

"I enjoyed your show," I said.

Katona nodded his thanks.

"I admired particularly the iron box."

He smiled and said, "It is a very pretty restraint." Then he did what a magician will do every time — changed the subject. "You are American," he said. "I am curious about what you think of Hungary, my country, and its present government."

I wasn't looking for an argument. I said. "Oh, it's all right, if that's what they want."

"Yes," he said. "My father, a vintner of the north shore of Lake Balaton, was deported in nineteen fifty to Russia. It was not what he wanted."

I made a sympathetic noise. I couldn't think of anything to say, and there was an uncomfortable silence. "Did you ever meet Houdini?" I asked.

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He shook his head and then said, rather absently, "My grandfather knew a Rabbi Weiss, of Budapest, before the rabbi emigrated to your Wisconsin. This man became Houdini's father. *Et voilà* my closest link with Houdini."

"Oh. Well, I suppose you've read Houdini's books, though?"

Katona said, "Yes," and then: "Are you enjoying your visit to Paris?"

I took the hint, unwillingly, and got off magic. I had another Calvados, and this time Katona joined me. As the conversation went on, we had more drinks, and I may have grown a little talkative. I told him why I was in Paris. I told him about chucking my little job with the UN in New York. Secretary to a secretary. I'd gone into the job with a lot of childish hopes for world peace, but the closer I studied the trend of international events the quicker my hopes had petered out. After a couple of years at it, I quit and came to Paris to have some fun before the roof fell in. If my conscience didn't like it, my conscience could go to blazes.

Katona listened to me with sincere interest, almost a personal concern. A couple of times he almost spoke, then clamped his jaw shut; I got the idea he was resisting a fervent desire to give me a lecture. But he must have realized that words wouldn't do any good. When I had it all said, he didn't offer any sirupy advice. He just said, "I wish you luck."

"Good luck yourself," I said, as he stood up to leave. "That job tomorrow morning sounds dangerous."

He said, "I carry insurance."

It was quite a while before I found out what kind of insurance he meant.

I was on the Quai d'Orsay an hour early the next morning. People from the audience of the night before, along with their friends, were already beginning to gather. Katona rode up at five minutes to ten, seated beside the driver of a horse-drawn wagon. His iron box was on the bed of the cart. Pasted to the side of the box was one of the white posters I had already seen, with its *Katona, l'incroyable* in large letters. He had the driver stop the cart at the head of the stairway that ran down to the lower quay, and several men from the audience carried the box down the stairs for him. They set it down on the square paving stones, about a foot from the water's edge.

There were two old men sitting at the river's edge, fishing in the cool, green water. They had bamboo poles about fifteen feet long. They noted our preparations with small curiosity and no resentment; for centuries, the fishing in the Seine has been so superlatively bad that nothing can make it worse.

There were by now several hundred spectators. Almost as soon as the box had been set down, a gendarme pushed his way through the crowd. For a minute I was worried. Then I noticed that he was one of those policemen who are very stern of word

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and amazingly friendly of face; there are lots like him in Paris. He faced Katona and said, "Whatever this is, it is forbidden."

Katona outlined politely what was going on, and said it would take only a few minutes.

The gendarme nodded sagely and scratched his nose. "It is, as I have notified you, quite specifically forbidden," he said. "I shall return in three hours to arrest you, if you are still here." Then he walked away. I saw him stop under a horse-chestnut tree forty yards up the river to watch the rest of the proceedings.

Katona, wearing an old sweater and dungarees, passed two pigs of lead around for inspection and then placed them in the bottom of the box. He climbed in. I had already had my fill, at the night performances, of twisting on perfectly legitimate boltheads, and today there were plenty of eager hands helping to put the lid on, so I kept out of the way.

When the lid was on and the padlocks were locked through the ends of the bolts, somebody rapped on the box and asked Katona if he were ready.

His voice came faintly from inside, muffled but gay. "*Allez-y!*"

Four men picked up the box, holding it level, and swung it back and forth three times. On the third forward swing they let go, and the box hit the water with a great splash. It disappeared at once, although a series of bubbles continued to rise to the surface and break.

A minute went by, two minutes. The white poster, torn from the box by the water, rose like a ghost toward the surface, flapping downstream on the slow current. *Katona, l'incroyable* Three minutes. Four . . .

The bubbles stopped.

I stood there looking at the water, knowing only that something had gone wrong.

I know a great deal more now — more about Janos Katona and his trick, and everything about what went wrong. At least, I think I do.

I'd like to tell it all, exactly as I think it happened, from the moment he stepped into the box. Then I will tell how I found out.

When Katona stepped into the iron box, there on the quay, he expected no trouble. He thought he would be out of the river and taking a bow within a minute and a half. He had performed the same escape at least two hundred times on the stage, and three times, for publicity, on the bottom of the Danube River at Budapest.

Sitting there in the open box, he probably thought of it as a fortunate coincidence that the unknown challenger of last night had chanced on a trick which was so well practiced. Working without an assistant, as he had been forced to do since coming to Paris, caused difficulties enough, even with these standard escapes.

Now they were preparing to put the lid on. He had to be ready.

As soon as the lid reached the top

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of the box and started sliding down, Katona performed a piece of manual dexterity that had cost him many hours of practice, even after a lifetime as a sleight-of-hand expert. It all had to be accomplished in somewhat less than one second — that was the time it took for the lid to slide all the way down.

There were three separate motions in the trick, and they had to be linked together into something smooth, unhurried, yet lightning fast.

His hands were already on the bolts. The first motion was that of withdrawing the bolts and dropping them in his lap without a clatter. The second was harder, because the fake bolts were in a satin sheath, taped to the skin at the back of his left knee. His hands had to swing up under his pant leg and withdraw the bolts. The third motion, which took place just at the instant the lid finished sliding into place, was an accurate, ambidextrous stab with the substitute bolts at the two circles of light that were the holes.

All this he did quite successfully, as he had done it so many times before. He sat in the dark then and heard the locks click in the bolts. Somebody outside called to ask if he were ready, and he answered, "*Allez-y!*"

He felt the motion as the box was raised from the pavement, and he braced his hands, feet, and shoulders for the jar. It was not a bad jar.

He heard the splash, followed by the whisper of water sliding upward past him. Then he felt another jar as the box hit bottom. The weights had kept it upright, and the current wasn't strong enough to tip it over; that made things simpler.

He went to work immediately, in the rapidly cooling dark, hearing the rustle of air leaking out around the lid and through the holes, and the murmur of water leaking in. He pulled the bolts inward half an inch, which was as far as they would come, and then went to work at unscrewing the one on his left. It seemed to be starting hard. He held the bolt shaft between finger and thumb of his left hand, twisting the head sharply with his right. He'd have to use a little oil before he tried this particular escape again. He twisted again, grunting with the effort.

The head wasn't going to unscrew at all!

In bewilderment, he attacked the other bolt. But he knew already what must have happened: somehow, in some way that he could not yet understand, the bolts had got switched.

The water in the box was over his shoe tops already. There wasn't much time, but he had to know the full gravity of the situation before he could do anything about it. He picked up one of the bolts that were in his lap and twisted the head. It unscrewed.

Janos Katona took one frugal, shallow breath of the already-stuffy air in the box and tried to get a grip on himself. Houdini had credited half his success to coolness in emergencies, and Katona had learned that lesson well.

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Even as he set to work again, his mind was coolly taking stock of his weapons for survival: he had what he called his "insurance," in its pouch taped behind his right knee; he also had an ability, almost approaching Houdini's, to conserve oxygen. Perhaps, with these advantages, he still had a chance.

His insurance was now ripped loose and lying in his lap. It was a satin pouch full of miniature tools, and he had last used it in his escape from the interrogation cell in Budapest. It contained three kinds of picks for opening locks, a shortened screwdriver, a four-inch piece of hacksaw blade, and a capsule of potassium cyanide. The poison was for the most irrevocable escape of all, and there had been times in his eventful life when he had come within a hair's breadth of having to use it.

The darkness was total, but his fingertips knew the saw blade well. He was at work on the shaft of one of the bolts almost before he had thought about it.

But the hopelessness of his position struck him like a club, as soon as the saw blade began taking its pitifully small bites of steel. It was like working on flint with a nail file, and he was now sitting in water a foot deep.

He pushed the hopelessness away with an effort of self-hypnotism. He had now been on the bottom of the river for approximately two minutes. There must be no panic, because panic would speed the heart and cost more oxygen. Letting his hands work on, he deliberately put his mind to the problem of how the bolts had been switched.

He remembered something now. He had had a slight surprise earlier this morning when he had awakened to find the door of his hotel room open. There had been a further moment of puzzlement when the watch man at the theater had reported almost catching an intruder in the night. But nothing had been missing or harmed at either place, and he hadn't put the two incidents together in his mind until now.

They came together in a flash at this moment, when it was too late — with the water cold about his chest and with his saw blade only beginning to scratch a channel in the steel.

Only one man knew enough to do this to him, and that man's name was Tisza. Tisza had been jealous, even in the old days, when he had worked as Katona's assistant on the stage in Hungary; and his political views had differed sharply from Katona's.

Tisza would know how to assassinate a man without making a martyr of him. Tisza would know how the iron-box trick worked and where both sets of bolts were kept. Tisza was no mean magician himself and could walk softly. Tisza could disguise himself with mustache and glasses, for a murderous evening at the theater.

"At least I am regarded as worth assassinating," Katona noted, and his lips smiled as his hands worked.

The blade was only about one quarter of the way through the bolt

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— the first of *two* bolts — and the water was already at his shoulders.

He remembered checking the contents of the satin sheath as he was taping it on his leg this morning, but he had checked carelessly, and only by feel. After all, the bolts were *there* — why should he suspect that they were not the right ones? Well, he would never be careless again. Or careful again, for that matter, he realized. Or alive again. But he kept the saw going.

He thought about Hungary, the free Hungary he had worked for.

When the water reached his chin, he took one great breath of nearly worthless air and then began letting it out of his nose, very slowly. He knew he was good for only two more minutes.

Always the saw kept going, still on the first of the bolts, and barely halfway through. It kept going for almost a minute more before hope died, and it stopped.

For an instant, Janos Katona sat very still. The box was full of water now, and empty of air. He could hear the measured throbbing of his own pulse in his ears, still without the speed of panic. If he prayed, the prayer was very brief.

Hope came back almost like a dream. It was a very tiny hope. Deliberately, Katona's hands groped for the screwdriver, dropping the saw blade which was too slow a tool to be of further use. He raised the screwdriver and attempted to use it as a lever to break the weakened bolt, but there seemed to be no way of getting a solid purchase. Then he thought of something. He passed the ringlike steel handle of the screwdriver over the bolthead and let the screwdriver hang from the shaft of the bolt. Then he picked up one of the faked bolts from his lap, set its end inside the ring of the screwdriver handle, and pried upward against the bolthead. The sawed bolt broke off with a snap that hurt his ears.

Quickly he dropped his tools and pushed the headless bolt out through the hole. Then he ducked his head, got his shoulders against the lid of the box, and thrust his body upward.

The other bolt wouldn't break; he knew that. But with all the leverage of the cover working on it, it might bend.

He felt the cover move upward an inch, then jam. He heaved his shoulders against it again and forced it free. He wanted great gulps of air, but he forced himself to keep his mouth closed. He pushed again, felt the lid give some more, and then used one hand to measure the space between the lid and box, on the side where there was no bolt. It was enough! He could squeeze through! He did so and paddled weakly upward toward the light.

Still in his shoes were the two pieces of fishline, each five feet long, which he had planned to use as usual for pulling the original bolts out through the holes, so that he could lock the box as before. The refinements of the illusion were no longer

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important. The only important thing was air.

A moment later his head broke the surface of the Seine, and he breathed, sobbing, and heard the shouts of the crowd.

That is what happened. At least, that is how Katona told it to me in La Petite Marmite a few hours later. At the time, I found it impossible to doubt a single word of it.

He told me that something had inspired him during his ordeal, and that he therefore planned to return to Hungary, and the underground, immediately. He claimed to have learned two things on the bottom of the river. He had learned that he was regarded as an important enemy of the dictators, important enough to be assassinated. And he learned that nothing is impossible so long as there is hope, even a tiny hope.

He preached me this little sermon so well that I got all steamed up. I still am, and I guess I always will be. I'm back at my job with the UN, and though my hope for peace is small, it is steady and it is precious.

I'm almost sure that's the end of the story. But I'll admit that a friend of mine has just had a letter from Paris, and I'll tell you what it says. Katona is still there! He didn't go to Hungary. He's still in Paris, and still wowing them, just as if that underwater ordeal of his had never happened at all.

Now do you suppose it *didn't?* Do you suppose I've been bamboozled? I still remember seeing Katona smile at me, on the stage that time, when I was trying to unscrew the boltheads. Did he take his cue from that theory of mine? Did he spin me a cloak-and-dagger yarn and hang a moral on it, just to send me back?

I'm happy; my conscience is my friend. But I can't help wondering. Could it be that I *still* haven't found the real gimmick for the iron-box trick? I don't know. I told you I was a sucker for a magician.

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EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD
TITLE:	*Danger — Women at Work*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	The female of the species
LOCALE:	A town in the United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild, and their seven-year-old son Paulie, were just finishing breakfast. What happened then shouldn't happen to any of us. A tale with a twist — in the very last word!*

"EAT YOUR EGG, PAULIE," EDNA said. "You'll make daddy late."

"Today I *want* to go to school," remarked little Paul virtuously. "I'm going to be a nomitor."

"Monitor, darling. Rick, will you be home early?"

"If I can. It's Friday, you know — the Jenks payroll is getting so large it takes hours to handle it. I can remember when it was only about $10,000, and now it's nearer $100,000 — pretty good for a town the size of this one, isn't it?"

"And *my* husband the cashier of the only bank!" said Edna proudly.

"I'd be a smaller frog in a bigger puddle."

The front doorbell rang.

"Good Lord!" Richard exclaimed. "That's not Julia already, is it?"

"Heavens, no — she won't be here for an hour at least."

"What's she want this time?"

"Now, that's not nice, Rick. Paulie, run and open the door, will you, dear? If it's somebody selling something, tell him mother's too busy right now."

Richard smiled apologetically.

"Sure, honey, I know — Julia's your best friend. But she makes me nervous. She always snaps me up so quick."

"Julia's a wonderful friend," said Edna firmly. "And anyway, all she wants today is some advice about clothes. She's —"

Paulie was back.

"It's three men," he announced. "They want daddy."

"Three? What on — at this hour?"

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"They said Mr. Fairchild."

"Okay, I'll go see. Finish your breakfast, Paulie, if you want to be dropped off at school. I'm leaving in exactly twelve minutes."

There were three men, all right, one tall and thin, the others shorter and stockier. Through the front door Paulie had left open, Richard could see their sedan parked outside, next to his own coupe.

"Mr. Fairchild?" inquired the tall one pleasantly. "Can we talk to you for a minute?"

Richard led the way to the living-room, a bit embarrassed to discover he was still holding a piece of toast. He laid it surreptitiously on the table by the telephone.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. "If it's business, we'd better discuss it at the bank. I'm pretty nearly due there now."

"It's business," the spokesman said quietly.

Richard found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver leveled at his head.

"What the —" His voice became a whisper.

"Don't get excited. Call your wife and kid in here."

"Edna," Richard croaked. It wasn't necessary — Edna stood in the doorway, Paulie clinging to her. One of the two stocky men had them covered. At a nod from the leader, the other stocky man shut and locked the front door, then went through the dining-room and kitchen to guard the back one.

Richard tried to collect his thoughts. It was all too sudden. All he could think was that they didn't look like robbers; they were neatly dressed, clean and shaved, and the tall, thin man — the others hadn't spoken — talked like an educated man.

"Be quiet and listen, and nobody will get hurt," the spokesman said in the same calm tone. "We've got this all worked out to the last detail — we've been months at it. Do as we tell you, and the whole thing will go through like clockwork. It's no skin off your nose — the money's insured and you're only a salaried employee anyway, no matter what your title is."

"What are you going to do to my husband?" Edna cried.

"Nothing that will harm him — if he plays ball." The leader turned to her politely but his finger remained steady on the trigger. Richard glanced at Paulie. The boy stood with his mouth open, too fascinated to be scared.

"I'm going to give you the entire procedure, so you'll know exactly what's what. Mr. Fairchild, you're going with me to the bank in my car. You'll open up and let me in, with two more of us who are waiting there now. You've got seven employees — I know them all and just when they're due at work. We're going to lock them all up, as they come in — you first — in the Board of Directors' room, and keep you there for an hour."

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"Why?" asked Richard hoarsely. Involuntarily his eyes darted to the telephone.

"Because it'll be an hour before the time-clock releases the vault," said the tall man suavely, "and that's where the big money is — the money for the Jenks payroll. When we've got that and are ready for our getaway, the last of us out will unlock the door of the Board of Directors' room. Then you can phone anybody you want. We'll have the license numbers of our car changed by then — so you needn't look at the ones we have now, when you leave here. We'll have transferred to another car, anyway, long before the police can find this one.

"But if anybody so much as touches the phone in the Board of Directors' room before we let you know we're finished, we'll know it — we'll have an extension open and be listening. It's the only way you could get word outside — the windows are too high. I repeat — if anyone touches that phone, one of our men will phone the two men I'm leaving here. . . . Now, I'm sure you're going to be sensible about this, Mr. Fairchild. Because if we *do* have to notify our men, they'll shoot Mrs. Fairchild and your son before they leave."

Richard stared, white-faced.

The tall man glanced again at Edna and half smiled.

"And I know Mrs. Fairchild's going to be sensible too, and not make any foolish moves to try to rescue you. But we won't put temptation in her way; as soon as you and I have left, my friends here will tie her and the boy up. They won't be hurt, but they won't be able to get near the doors or windows, or this phone, either."

There was a sick silence. It was Paulie who broke it.

"But I *gotta* get to school today!" he wailed. "I'm going to be a nomitor!"

Thank heaven, Edna thought wildly, for those blood-and-thunder TV shows, after all! If they did nothing else, they made this into a game in which a threat of murder didn't terrify or even intimidate a seven-year-old.

"Sorry, son." The leader smiled at him affably. "You'll be a hero when you go to school this afternoon, and that will be much more fun."

"And don't *you* try to be any hero, Richard Fairchild!" Edna rapped out suddenly. "I want a live husband. Do as the man says."

"You're a very sensible lady," the tall man approved. "Come on, Mr. Fairchild, let's go."

Richard opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He and Edna exchanged a long look. Then, with the gun prodding his back, he reopened the front door.

"Do you have to tie Paulie up too?" Edna appealed to the man still covering her as the last sound of the car was lost in the distance. "He'll be good and just sit here and play, won't you, Paulie?"

"Have to do what the boss says,"

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the man answered. His voice was quiet too, though it lacked the urbanity of the leader's. He whistled, and the other man came from where he had been guarding the back door. He too had his gun out. In his other hand he held a coil of flex. Edna recognized it — it was from the electric iron.

"Be fun, won't it, youngun?" he said ingratiatingly. "Just like playing Indians." Paulie submitted, wide-eyed, to being trussed firmly into the big green chair. "Here, where's your toys or something? I'll leave your hands free so you can play with them."

"There," said Paulie, pointing. "Are you going to scalp my mother?"

Both men laughed, and Paulie looked offended.

"Nothing like that, kid," said the other man. "Now you, lady. You bring something to tie her with, Bud?"

Bud fished in his hip-pocket with his left hand and drew out the long cord from the vacuum cleaner.

Under the menacing revolver, Edna walked to the chair on the other side of the fireplace.

"Comfortable, M'am? Here, I'll put this little table by you with the cigarettes and the magazines. See, that ain't so bad, is it? Nobody's going to harm you, lady, 's long as your husband shows good sense. And it'll be all over in an hour or so."

"Suppose the phone rings?" Edna asked.

"You just hope it *doesn't* ring, lady. You heard what the boss said. You just hope it isn't the call from him. Any others, I'll say it's the wrong number."

His eye fell on the piece of toast Richard had dropped by the telephone.

"Hey, that reminds me. You folks had your breakfast?"

Paulie nodded. His eyes followed every move the men made; his face shone with excitement.

"Well, *we* ain't. Bud, go out to the kitchen again and see if you can rustle up something for us."

Bud, the handyman, departed obediently.

Edna took a cigarette from the box, and her keeper jumped to light it for her. Once she and Paulie were securely tied, both men had put their guns back in the holsters.

"You won't get away with this, you know," she said, careful to keep her voice from shaking. "The F.B.I. will be after you, not just our local police. You kidnaped my husband."

"You let us worry about that, lady. The boss knows what he's doing. He's got everything figured out. What you got there, Bud?"

They sat down in chairs opposite the bound two, and amiably devoured ham sandwiches and coffee. Paulie watched them, absorbed. Edna chain-smoked. Nobody spoke.

The doorbell rang.

Edna drew a deep breath.

"It's a friend of mine," she said quietly. "She won't go away. We had a date this morning."

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"You ought to've told us," said Bud's partner reproachfully. He stood a minute in thought. "All right, lady, she can't see into this room from the front door. Untie her, Bud." Bud obeyed quickly.

"Now you —" The revolvers were out again. "You go to the door, and I'll be right behind you, inside these curtains. You tell her — tell her the kid's sick, that the doctor says it's something contagious, and she better not come in. And remember, I'll be right there. If you say a word to give her any funny ideas, I'll let you have it."

"I'll have to talk to her a little, or she *would* think it was funny." Edna was stretching her cramped legs.

"Okay, but watch it."

Nobody, from the doorstep, could see behind the drapes. But Edna could feel the muzzle pressing gently just below her left shoulder blade.

It was Julia. Edna braced herself.

"Julia!" she cried brightly. "How are you dear? . . . Look, honey, this is dreadful, but I can't let you in. Paulie's sick."

"Sick?" Julia looked puzzled. "But then let me —"

"No, it's contagious, the doctor says. I don't want to take a chance on infecting your children with anything."

Julia's eyes widened.

"Rick had already gone to the bank before I called the doctor, so he couldn't let you know," Edna went on hurriedly. "We're going to take Paulie to Farnham Hospital just as soon as the doctor can get a bed in the children's ward."

"Isn't there anything I can do to help?" Julia asked eagerly. The iron below Edna's shoulder blade pressed just a little more deeply.

"Why, yes, there *is* one thing, if you will," Edna answered quickly. "When you go to the school at noon to pick up your own children, would you mind seeing Paulie's teacher, Miss Schermerhorn, and telling her? I don't want to mention it over the phone — somebody might overhear, and you know how panicky they get about contagion."

"Miss Schermerhorn?"

"Yes, you know — the new teacher who just came this year."

"I'll be glad to do it," said Julia. "Shall I phone Richard at the bank for you and tell him, or have you done that already?"

"No, he's terribly busy at the bank this morning, and besides I don't want to worry him. I'll phone him as soon as we know about the hospital, but that probably won't be till after you've seen Miss Schermerhorn."

"I won't wait till noon, Edna — I'll drive right down and tell the teacher now."

"Oh, that would be even better! I'm very grateful to you. And you do understand, Julia, why I can't ask you in? I'd never forgive myself if I exposed your youngsters."

"Of course I understand, Edna. Don't worry. Just take care of yourself."

"Oh, I'll be all right."

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Edna found she was trembling all over as she closed the door.

"You sure gabbed long enough," the man growled. "And what's the point of having her tell the teacher the kid's sick, when he can go back to school again this afternoon? You didn't need to carry it that far."

"I wanted her to feel it was serious, so she wouldn't be offended by my not letting her in," Edna said placatingly. "I had to give her *some* sort of errand to do."

The man marched her into the living-room. She sank with a sigh of relief into the chair and let herself be tied up again.

"Was that Auntie Julia?" Paulie demanded from his chair. "Did you tell her I was sick, like the man said?"

"Yes, dear. And she said she was very sorry."

Paulie wriggled in his chair.

"I'm getting awful tired," he complained. "When are they going to let us go?"

"How about watching television?" said his mother. "Will you turn the set on so he can look?"

"There's nothing on I want to see," Paulie whined. The game was beginning to pall.

"It won't be long now," Bud said soothingly, looking at his wrist watch. "You be a brave scout, and pretty soon the cavalry will come and drive off all the Indians . . . I got kids of my own," he confided to Edna. "I know how they are."

"If we ain't heard from the boss by 10.30 it means everything's clear and we can beat it," the other man added. "Somebody'll be along soon and untie you. We'll be leaving in your car, lady. The cops'll find it for you, so don't worry."

Edna nodded wearily.

"Might as well turn the TV on at that," said Bud, going over to the set. "Give us something to do till it's time to go."

It was a very noisy show, with a military band. Even Edna and Paulie didn't hear the cars driving up. Then suddenly the front door opened and the room was full of policemen with their guns out. It looked like nearly half the police force in town. It was. the other half was down at the bank, taking over the three men there.

"I still don't understand how you did it, darling," Richard said, holding her hand tight. In the reaction Edna had collapsed, and she was lying stretched out on the couch, still weak and shaking. They were all around her — Rick, Julia, the Chief of Police. Paulie, worn out by the excitement, was sound asleep in the chair where he had been tied.

"It was Julia," Edna said faintly, raising her head to smile at her friend. "I could never have put it over with anybody else. Tell them, Julia."

"Well, it was when she mentioned Paulie's being taken to the hospital that I began to realize she was trying to get something else across to me — that something must be dreadfully wrong.

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"Of course I didn't know she was speaking with a gun on her, but I guessed there must be some good reason for all that double-talk. Then Edna made that remark about *my* children — and me not married and not having any children! And then her saying that Paulie was going to the children's ward of the Farnham Hospital — which, of course, is just our town's polite name for the County Home for the Aged.

"Well, at last I caught on that Edna was in trouble. I didn't know where the trouble was — here or at the bank, or both — but something else Edna said made me decide to get down to police headquarters right away."

"It just goes to show you," said the Chief of Police. "It was the best planned robbery I ever heard of. Didn't look from their end as if *anything* could go wrong. But they weren't local men, so they weren't on to what every kid in town knows.

"At first I thought the lady was crazy," the Chief added apologetically. "But when she told me Mr. Fairchild's car was still parked outside this house, and yet Mrs. Fairchild said he was at the bank and being 'terribly busy' there — and then not letting her inside the house, and pulling that stuff about the Farnham Hospital to alert her — well, it *could* have been that Mrs. Fairchild was being held as a hostage. And there'd be no reason for that — unless somebody was trying to rob the bank. And it's Friday, the Jenks payday. So I played a hunch — and we were lucky.

"Thanks to you, Mrs. Fairchild, we've got hold of a man the whole state's wanted for a long time, and all his gang too. Won't do me any harm, either — a haul like this, the first month I've been on the job."

"And it won't do *me* any harm at the bank, I might add." Richard squeezed Edna's hand. "We've saved the Jenks payroll, all $98,000 of it, and I'm the fair-haired boy there now, even though it's thanks to my wife's brains."

"There's a reward for that fellow," said the Chief, "and I guess you two ladies will get a good share of it."

"I always knew I had a smart wife!" Richard said proudly. "And she's got a friend who's mighty quick on the uptake too. But I still don't get it, Julia. How did Edna make you realize so fast that it was a police matter?"

"Yes," the Chief put in. "I don't understand that either. You're a brave woman, Mrs. Fairchild. You took an awful chance, with a gun at your back. Just how did you do it?"

Edna and Julia burst into laughter. When Julia could talk, she explained.

"When you've lived longer in a small town like this, Chief, you'll realize that everybody is acquainted with everybody else. Those out-of-town bandits couldn't know it, but Edna and I were fully aware that there is only one person in town named —"

"Oh, I get it!" exclaimed Chief of Police Schermerhorn.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: CHARLES B. CHILD

TITLE: *The Lady of Good Deeds*

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Chafik

LOCALE: Baghdad, Iraq

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The Lady of Good Deeds had her own protectors — the Baghdad mob of beggars on crutches, shifty men, bedraggled women, waifs from the teeming bazaars; the Inspector also had his protectors . . .*

CHAFIK J. CHAFIK, A SENIOR OFficer of the Criminal Investigation Division of the Baghdad police, a neat little man, sat at breakfast and gently chided his adopted son, Faisal, saying, "When the mouth is stuffed with words it is improper to put food therein."

The boy submissively put down his spoon and looked up with soft brown, hopeful eyes. The Inspector, whose own eyes were drab and cynical, was touched by his ten-year-old son's innocence, and smiled warmly. Yet the glance that passed between foster father and son was tempered with caution; Faisal knew that a sleek cat, purring, must not be stroked the wrong way, and Inspector Chafik was aware that simplicity often camouflages a trip wire.

He had found Faisal in the great bazaars of Baghdad, a ragged waif, one of the pack that hunted there. Chafik was childless and the boy had appealed to him, so he had taken him into his home, an impulse that neither he nor his wife Leila had ever regretted.

The Inspector bowed toward the chair where his wife normally sat. Leila was away on a visit and he missed her. Wives become a habit after nineteen years, the little man told himself. Then he added: Such happy years! Tenderness made him

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drop his guard and he said to Faisal, "Speak, my son. Surely words were put into your mouth to please me."

The boy immediately began, "I want —"

"Eh?" Chafik said, becoming alert.

"It is because of tomorrow, my father, and I cannot tell you what it is, but I only have a fifty *fil* piece and it costs a dinar and you can take it out of my allowance and so you will not be pockets down and please, therefore, give me the money and —"

The Inspector covered his ears. "Beware of the rhapsody of words!" he said in a somber voice.

"But a dinar is only a piece of paper and anybody can make one and —"

Faisal was silenced by Chafik's expression; the swarthy face had become gaunter, the shadows under the high cheekbones darkened, and lines appeared at the sides of the thin nose. Slowly, deliberately, the Inspector reached to the inside pocket of his white linen jacket and took out a wallet.

The currency of his country was based on the English pound, and the well-engraved bill he put on the table was of the same value and the same olive-green color. He tapped it with a polished fingernail and announced, "Here is money —"

"Give me, my father! Give me —"

Inspector Chafik restrained Faisal's reaching hand. "Learn," he said sternly, "to respect this token; call it not paper, for the pure silver of man's toil is in it. And speak not of counterfeit, or you will live hereafter in the shadow of prison bars!"

As he returned the money to his wallet, a car's horn sounded at the street door. "Abdullah has come," he said, and went to get his shoes from under the hall table. A Moslem, he respected the sanctity of his home and walked stocking-footed on Leila's waxed floors, as in a mosque.

Faisal followed him, crying, "Father, my father! A dinar! Just one! For tomorrow — tomorrow —"

"Tomorrow," Chafik said, "is another day." He embraced the boy and went out to the car. A towering police sergeant greeted him with a salute, a dour smile, and a murmured blessing. The Inspector affectionately patted the big man's arm and, the sun being strong, stood in his shadow as he lighted a cigarette. Faisal's appeal puzzled him and he asked, "What urgency has tomorrow?" and was immediately embarrassed because he had not intended to broadcast the thought. "What *day* is tomorrow?" Chafik demanded to cover the slip.

Abdullah answered, "The fifth, sir."

"It has significance?"

"Days, being granted by God, all have significance."

The Inspector accepted the rebuke and got into the waiting car. The sky was a blue arc, but the groves of date palms along the way were still dark with morning shadow. Pumps sounded up and down the river, water glittered in irrigation ditches, and

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perpetually courting doves cooed under the eaves of the houses.

"And from this," Chafik complained, "you take me without doubt to some disgusting corpse."

His assistant replied soothingly, "It was not a very violent night, sir, but a man named Khalib —"

"Is he the petty criminal?"

"Yes, sir, the same one. He was beaten to death in an alleyway of the old town. No witnesses. An unimportant crime, sir; such a —"

"Nevertheless, his soul cries out for vengeance and we must heed. Has anything else of note happened?"

Abdullah eased the car into the traffic of the great bridge that spanned the Tigris. "Sir," he said, his mahogany face showing astonishment, "there were two more denouncements this morning — detailed and lawyerproof."

The Inspector raised his eyebrows. At intervals, for some months now, his office had received anonymous reports on the Baghdad underworld. The identity of the informer could not be traced; no Judas reward was asked; no shabby spy ingratiated himself.

"Surely this accuser will share the fate of the unlamented Khalib!" exclaimed Chafik. Bewildered, he shook his head. "Is that all then, Abdullah?"

"A report from the Ankara police, sir. They have taken a counterfeiter and found plates for our currency. Series 'Y', commencing with the number thirty-eight, sir, and one-dinar denomination only."

The Inspector forgot Khalib and the mystery of the benevolent informer; he was back at the breakfast table lecturing Faisal, seeing the pleading eyes, the practiced begging gesture of the curved palm. "This day is under the influence of a mercenary planet," he said gloomily.

They went to the Suq-al-Jedid police station to see the remains of Khalib. The man had been viciously clubbed by a gang, and then he had been stripped, his clothes abandoned, and his possessions scattered. Sergeant Abdullah said, "They either searched for something or put him to the question."

"If they questioned him they didn't get an answer," Chafik said and showed his assistant the medical report. "An abnormally thin skull. The first blow or two caused a hemorrhage. Dead before they ceased beating him. Such a waste of energy! What were Khalib's prior movements?"

"I understand, sir, that he toured the cafés, begging for money —"

"I am sympathetic," said Chafik, remembering pressing bills.

"Yes, sir. But I am informed Khalib was desperate. Eventually he went to the Café of the Abundant Fruits —"

"Iskander's place?" The Inspector's drab eyes were as barren as the desert. "That den of iniquity!" he exclaimed.

"Khalib then improved the company he kept, sir; his last witnessed contact was with Madam Aliya —"

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"Eh? *Binti Ma'mum?* The Lady of Good Deeds?"

She who was called the Lady of Good Deeds was a strange and much-loved character; she moved among the poor of Baghdad, begged for them, and gave all to them. The old woman was a member of a noble family, and Chafik knew what she had sacrificed for her charity. He salaamed, curving the fingers of his right hand to his forehead. "Good old woman," he said. "Do not let us name her in the same breath as Khalib or Iskander!"

"Khalib raised his voice to the lady —" Abdullah continued.

"Then he deserved to die," the Inspector said and went to look at the dead man's possessions, which were arranged on a table. He picked up a pen, then a watch, shrugged, and announced, "Smuggled goods. That was his profession — a vendor of dutiable trifles. I am puzzled that anybody should bother to kill him."

He tossed aside the dead man's identity papers, paused to read a letter, and said, "So the animal had a wife in Basra!" Then he became absorbed in a document that had been typed on an old, but curiously familiar, Arabic keyboard. Chafik startled Sergeant Abdullah by exclaiming, "Merciful One! Another denouncement!"

"Sir?"

"And so unique! It is an imprisonment warrant for the man who carried it! What are our criminals coming to when they go around Baghdad with their dossiers in their pockets?"

Abdullah took the document. It was typed on cheap paper, so spongy that the faded ribbon often left a smudge instead of a character, and it was typical of all the anonymous denouncements they had received at headquarters. Detailed in it was Khalib's illegal trade; his sources, his customers, and when and where he had met them. The police, to prepare such a case, would have had to switch men from serious investigations and expend considerable funds in bribes.

The sergeant returned the paper and said, "Sir, I, too, am surprised." The repose of his impassive face was flawed by a twitch.

Chafik shouted, "God the Compassionate! So my sergeant is surprised!" In an excess of emotion he tugged at his tie. "Khalib is interesting and deserves my personal inquiry," the Inspector said in a calmer voice. "Shall we begin with that Father of Humbug, Joseph Iskander? Shall we descend into the depths to talk with him? Come, Abdullah!"

They walked through airless and narrow streets, between high walls. Windows, shuttered against the sun, were secretive and hostile; a shutter would open, and then be immediately closed against the glances of the uniformed police sergeant and the little man in the white suit.

Iskander's Café of the Abundant Fruits was a tall old building with a tawdry façade facing the busy street and a rear exit opening onto the brown waters of the Tigris. There were green benches outside where

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robed Arabs sprawled; within, the café was a den infested by flies and secretive men.

The proprietor came toward the two men. He had a round jovial face marked with the blotchy scar of a Baghdad boil. The waistband of his trousers strained over an enormous stomach and when he extended short arms in greeting, patches of sweat showed on his once white shirt.

He cried, "My friend!" and clapped his pudgy hands to summon a waiter. "Honey cakes for the Inspector!"

Chafik pressed a handkerchief sprinkled with orange water to his nose. "Not even honey cakes, Joseph," he said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw men get up and slink from the café. "I am not good for business," he added dryly.

"You have business?" asked Iskander in a confidential whisper.

"Concerning Khalib —"

"A bad man!"

"He was killed last night."

"So?"

"He was here before he was killed."

The café proprietor lost his jovial expression. "Yes, Khalib was here," he admitted.

"Did he ask you for money?"

A bead of sweat ran down Iskander's cheek. "You talk of money!" he shouted. "Listen, last night that Khalib ate my good pilaf and drank a carafe of my Syrian arak, then left without paying — and now you tell me he will never pay me!"

"Was he alone? Did anybody follow him when he left?"

"I did not see. I was busy. There was a little trouble, a fight, and I had to put people out. You know what a good place I run here," Iskander said, and was jovial again.

The Inspector selected a cigarette and, as an afterthought, offered it to Iskander. "A very special brand," he said as he struck a match. "Have you recently seen that good lady, Madam Aliya?" he added casually.

"The old one?" Iskander muttered under his breath. Then he said, "Such a nice lady! We all love her! Put a finger on *Binti Ma'mum* and the mobs of Baghdad will be after you — and me, too!" The fat man laughed. "What do you want with her?" he asked.

"Khalib was with her before he was killed."

"So?" Iskander studied his cigarette.

Chafik waited expectantly, but then the café proprietor gave an almost imperceptible shrug. It was always the same; nobody would talk about the Lady of Good Deeds.

"Devils are supposed to materialize when one mentions them," said Iskander. "You, Inspector, talk of angels, and — lo — one appears." He nodded in the direction of the door.

The street was a stage, the sun a spotlight. A frail, bowed woman stood against the flaked whitewash of the wall across the way. She wore a chuddar, the shroudlike outdoor robe of the Middle East. A bulging oilcloth reticule dangled from one hand and in the other was a *khubis*, a piece of

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unleavened bread, folded over meat; she gave it to a beggar who came whining up to her.

"So kind," said Iskander, tearfully.

Chafik said nothing, but the sergeant said softly, "May the Great Architect of the Universe shower His abundant blessings upon her — apples of silver, caskets of gold —"

"You prate as a bazaar letter writer writes," grumbled the Inspector. He crossed the road to talk to the old lady. She was unveiled and the headfolds of the rusty dark robe were arranged to frame her nut-brown, wrinkled face, to which the years had given serenity after beauty. The woman's mouth was gentle, and her kindly eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief that reminded Chafik of his son. He noticed that she gave her hair careful attention, even used henna. Coquetry in one so old pleased the Inspector and he performed his most gallant salaam.

"Of course I know you!" said the Lady of Good Deeds when he had introduced himself. "And I know your son; once he was one of my waifs — such a rascal!"

"A touch of that sauce improves the flavor of small boys."

Madam Aliya's laughter was like the tinkle of bells on the toes of a dancing girl. "I wondered at the time why the face was so familiar," she said thoughtfully. "They all look much alike when smeared with dirt."

"What is this about Faisal?" asked Chafik suspiciously.

"Nothing, oh, nothing!" the old woman said and her delicate hand, bare of rings, fluttered like a hummingbird.

The Inspector decided the old lady was senile. "I have a query," he said, speaking carefully, as to a child. "Did you meet a man named Khalib last night?"

"He is a bad man."

"Yes, madam —"

"And sometimes bad men repent."

Chafik decided the Lady of Good Deeds was being evasive and he said with a touch of brusqueness, "You did meet him!"

She nodded. "He gave me money for my poor; I think it was ten dinars —" Madam Aliya fumbled among the greasy packages of food in her reticule and brought out a small notebook. "Yes, ten," she said as she consulted it. "And I have given it all away — the last dinar only a few minutes ago to —". The laughter of a dancing girl's bells again rang in the street.

A tidy man in person and thoughts, Chafik was shocked by the present disorder of his mind. One part of it was puzzled by the woman's gentle mockery, while another asked why Khalib, who had gone around the cafés begging money from acquaintances, should have given with such munificence to Madam Aliya's poor.

He said, angered because he couldn't reason it out, "So Khalib gave you money, eh?"

The old lady closed the notebook and put it away but not before the Inspector had noticed a list of names,

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some followed by figures, others not — the latter were struck out. "You are rude," Madam Aliya said.

"I am a policeman!" he said.

"Did he —" the Lady of Good Deeds started to ask and hesitated. "Did Khalib steal that money?" she said.

"I am not concerned about his ten miserable dinars!" Chafik said, still angry. "Madam, Khalib was killed last night! You were his last witnessed contact, and I want to know, I must know, if anybody was with him — if you saw —"

He was bewildered by the woman's suddenly lifting the folds of her robes over her face, and he was reminded of his son. Faisal had the same baffling trick; he hid under the bedclothes when he was questioned about a misdemeanor. There was even the eye, the one anxious eye, that always peeped out from under the covers.

"Madam," Chafik said, anxious to placate her, and then he heard the murmur and was aware of the mob.

There were beggars on crutches, bedraggled women nursing naked children, and there were workmen armed with tools, and shifty men who blinked in unaccustomed light. Suddenly they had come, out of nowhere, and Inspector Chafik knew the reality of Iskander's warning that the poor of Baghdad would protect their benefactress.

If I take her for questioning there will be a city-wide riot, he thought. So be discreet. You can always go to her later if you want her . . . He smiled at the old lady, said, "Madam, I leave you to your friends," and reproved himself for being afraid when he turned his back on the mob.

In the wide and orderly streets beyond the bazaar, the Inspector began to breathe more easily. "That was not good, my temper was tried," he admitted to Sergeant Abdullah.

He stopped to admire a haberdasher's display. Often, when on his rounds of the city, the little man took time out for this shop window; he was attracted by ties and socks as a woman is by novelties and hats. "An imported foulard," Chafik said, as he rubbed the dust of a recent storm off the window, the better to see a certain tie. "One dinar," he added, and fingered his thin wallet. "Abdullah, remove me from temptation," he said, and walked on.

Then he went back and pressed his nose to the glass. There was a boy in the shop, a small olive-complexioned boy, who proudly displayed a dinar bill as he waited to be served.

"Faisal!" exclaimed Chafik. He went in and in his best policeman's manner put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Where did you get that money?" he demanded.

The eyes that were lifted to his own turned blank with fear. "But, my son!" cried the Inspector, troubled by the reaction. Then he saw the patches of dirt on the boy's face, leftovers from a recent and hasty cleaning. He remembered Madam Aliya's allusion to Faisal, "They all look much alike when smeared with dirt!"

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and how she had mocked him with her laughter. Chafik's suspicions were confirmed.

"You have been begging!" he accused his son.

"Father, I — it was for tomorrow. You wouldn't give me money — I had to have money!" Faisal's sobs made him incoherent.

"Enough about tomorrow!" the Inspector said, his thin face darkened with anger. "I know what you did! You borrowed rags from one of your unsanitary friends of the bazaars, dirtied yourself, and went honey-voiced to the Lady of Good Deeds! She thought you one of her waifs! Ah, you Thief of Baghdad!" shouted Chafik.

Sergeant Abdullah soothed him, saying, "Sir, the mischief of small boys and puppies is not delinquency. The hand that has an urge to apply itself to them should be restrained —"

"Nevertheless, that hand, like night must inevitably fall," Chafik said, but controlled himself; a Moslem father did not strike a son in public. "I do not understand," he went on sadly, "you are not a deceitful boy, Faisal, and you have all I can give you, yet you impose on a good old lady whose bountiful charity —" The embarrassed Inspector looked at the dinar which he had been folding and unfolding. All at once he smoothed it out. "You got this from Madam Aliya?" he demanded in a terrible voice.

"Really, truly, my father, I had to do it because — because —"

Inspector Chafik ignored his son. "Abdullah," he said. "With reference to the report of the Ankara police on the subject of counterfeit currency. Was the series Y-thirty-eight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then here is one of the bills! My son had it and he got it from Madam Aliya! Without doubt it is part of the gift the worthless Khalib gave her last night."

It was Chafik's habit to wander through Baghdad when faced with a difficult problem, and he did so now. He had sent his assistant to headquarters to organize a search for the counterfeit money. He expected that the dinars given away by the Lady of Good Deeds would be easily recovered, since he doubted that the counterfeiters had flooded the city. It took time to mastermind such an operation as that, and the warning of the Ankara police had been prompt; so the immediate problem was Khalib — his part in the conspiracy and why he had been killed. And why the man had carried a denouncement of himself!

Twilight and cooling air encouraged Chafik to extend his walk and he went almost to the village of Hinaidi, then crossed the river by the old bridge of boats. He watched some water buffaloes being driven to their night quarters by a group of small boys. He went up the right bank of the Tigris, through rustling palm groves, and so came to the houses of the Karradat Miriam. The lights of

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Baghdad beckoned in the distance.

Every detail, Chafik thought, must fit into place. It is like weaving a fine carpet. Colors must blend and harmonize with the pattern; and there can be no loose threads.

He dismissed the possibility of Khalib's being the major criminal, for a vendor of smuggled watches lacked both the skill and ambition. Furthermore, if the man had had access to all the counterfeit money, he would not have made such a desperate round of the cafés, seeking a loan.

Somewhere in the period between bilking Iskander and meeting the Lady of Good Deeds, he had found the counterfeit money. "But where?" Chafik asked the equestrian statue of King Faisal the First, which he was passing. The monarch who had tried to unite the Arab world continued his perpetual ride out of Baghdad toward Damascus. The Inspector made an obeisance and went to a nearby police station to telephone headquarters.

Sergeant Abdullah told him nine of the ten bills distributed by Madam Aliya had been recovered. "Sir, you have the tenth in your pocket," the sergeant said, reproaching him. "The one you took from your son, sir."

"I hope I do not spend it in my wanderings," Chafik said.

He was satisfied now that there had been no general issue. It was as he had expected: Khalib's passing of the forgeries had been an isolated incident. The Inspector continued his walk. There was no moon and the streets were dark. He crossed to the left bank by the upper bridge and so came to the old town and the neighborhood of the bazaars. Pedestrians avoided the little man in the white suit who made gestures and talked to himself.

"Would even Khalib dare to cheat God by giving charity with counterfeit coin?" Chafik demanded. "No!" he announced, and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "The creature didn't know it was bad money! He found it or stole it, and its owners followed him to get it back, and —"

He heard his voice, cursed the unbreakable habit that made him broadcast his thoughts, and took refuge in a shop where he habitually bought cigarettes. Chafik J. Chafik, you should be the city crier, not a policeman! he reprimanded himself. And then he said to the shopkeeper, "Khalib's skull was thin; he died before they could make him tell what he had done with the cash! How fortunate for the Lady of Good Deeds! But why did he give her the money in the first place? Eh?"

The tobacconist, an old man, said, "I'm not answering questions." His name was Setty; he had a criminal record and disliked the police.

"Is she as innocent as she looks?" the Inspector added, striking the counter with the flat of his hand, shocked by the thought.

"I don't want to hear anything," Setty told him. "I'll not talk, least of all about *Binti Ma'mum*." He took a pack of Chafik's special brand from a drawer and looked up with softened

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expression at a cage where a bird fluttered. "Your noisy voice disturbs my Abdu," he complained.

Chafik was suddenly aware of the man, the cage, and the cigarettes. He fumbled for money and tried to remember what he had said to annoy Setty. Always diplomatic, he admired the man's bird: "How unusual," he said, "to see one so plump and happy behind bars! He sings?"

"Once Abdu sang like a muezzin, now not at all." The tobacconist shook his head sadly, took Chafik's money, then threw it down and shouted, "Father of Guile! You send your police to warn me of counterfeit, then give me worthless paper, hoping I will change it so you can arrest me!"

The Inspector saw he had given the man the bill he had taken from Faisal. "A thousand apologies!" he said. "I did not intend . . ." He wanted to placate the man and had the inspiration to whistle at the silent bird. Abdu cocked his small head, wiped his beak on the perch, chirped, and then sang.

"Truly," exclaimed Setty, clasping his hands. "Abdu has the voice of an angel! And you, Inspector, must be the friend of angels to have inspired him after such long silence!"

Chafik murmured his gratitude to Abdu and praised God for the miracle of song. "You will cooperate and immediately report bad money?" he asked Setty as he replaced the counterfeit with the last bill in his wallet.

Setty promised. "Kindness deserves a kindness," he said and listened contentedly to the trilling of the bird, and then muttered, imitating the Inspector's habit of talking to himself, "I'll not tell him a thing about *Binti Ma'mum's* little black book!"

In his haste, Chafik left the cigarettes on the counter, and he was running before he reached the end of the street. The significance of Madam Aliya's notebook and why some of the names listed on it were struck out had come home to him. "Oh, Mother of Rascals!" he cried. "I put a weapon in your frail and mischievous hands! It is double-edged — may the Merciful One protect your nice old throat!"

The Inspector doubled through the alleyways of the bazaar and arrived at the rooming house where the Lady of Good Deeds lived the life of one of her own poor. There was a light in her window and Chafik took cover in a doorway. A cautious man, he wished a police patrol would come around, for he had no desire to use the gun in his shoulder holster.

He waited nearly half an hour, afraid to go to a telephone because Madam Aliya might be gone when he got back; then the light went out and the woman appeared. She was no more than a shadow in the dark street. Her body seemed formless in the bat-winged folds of the dark-colored chuddar. He recognized her by the oilcloth reticule that dangled from one hand, and by the way she hopped over ruts and piles of garbage, intent on some mission.

He followed. Her knowledge of this part of Baghdad was better than his own and he knew he must not

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frighten her with some unusual sound. He went quietly, staying close to the rough walls of unfriendly buildings, aware of the silence, afraid of the silence.

Madam Aliya stopped at a corner and, with an anxious gesture, opened her bag and began to rummage in it. Chafik was afraid that she had forgotten something and he backed into the shadows before she could turn.

A small dark man came up behind him and struck him. The Inspector was in a whirling spiral of shadow and light, and at the top, waiting, was the old lady. The reticule she carried was huge. Then he was inside it and heard the catch snap . . .

The room was cluttered; there was an ornate table, a confusion of chairs, an old-fashioned roll-top desk overflowing with papers, and, in a corner, a modern safe. It was an airless room but from somewhere came the odor of spices, heated oil, and savory food.

Chafik's first movements told him he was lying on a divan and was not bound in any way, but they had taken his gun. His head throbbed and the light hurt his eyes. "It was more restful in that bag," he said, then raised himself and saw the Lady of Good Deeds sitting at his side.

She said, "Poor man," and touched him with a cooling hand.

He winced as he tried to raise his head. "Madam," the Inspector said. "I expected you to lead me to Khalib's killer. I know how you strive to encourage bad men to do charitable acts, but the violence that has been done to me confuses me. Could it be that my reasoning was wrong? Are you responsible —"

A voice from the door interrupted, saying, "For shame, my friend! How could you have any doubts about our *Binti Ma'mum* — that blackmailing old hag!" Anger choked the speaker.

It was, thought Chafik, quite logical when Joseph Iskander came into his range of vision: it explained the cooking odors — the room was above the Café of the Abundant Fruits. "I should have worked the thread into the pattern earlier," the little man said.

"Pattern?" repeated Joseph Iskander, puzzled.

"Ah, that habit of speaking thoughts! I was, Joseph, merely reprimanding myself. Obviously Khalib — the man that you had killed — was without funds when he came here; yet when he left, he went straight to Madam Aliya and gave her ten dinars — counterfeit —"

"Khalib, that thief!" exclaimed Iskander. "He robbed me! Last night — you remember? — he ate my food and drank my wine and went away without paying, but what he also did was to come into this office when I was busy with a fight downstairs —"

"I remember," Chafik said. "You told me you had to put men out of your nicely run kitchen of thieves."

Iskander nodded at the roll-top desk. "I had the money on the desk," he went on. "The good counterfeit bills, Inspector! I had taken one sample from each of the packages that

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had arrived on the Taurus Express, and I was looking at them under the glass to make sure all had come from the same plate. Then —"

"So careless to leave them on the desk," Chafik said.

"I slapped my face! The entire amount — fifty thousand dinars — all of it gone, all gone! — because a thief takes ten worthless pieces of paper!" The fat man swore.

Chafik said reprovingly, "There is a lady present, Joseph." He looked at the old lady huddled under the dark robe, then he shook a finger at her and said, "You naughty one! How many years have you fed the poor of Baghdad by blackmailing Iskander?"

She lowered her eyes and there was a touch of laughter in her voice as she confessed, "One year, perhaps two."

"But the denouncements you wrote of various individuals are recent."

"One must sometimes apply unusual pressure to squeeze blood from a stone," said the old lady.

"So there was revolt against your gentle touch!" the Inspector said, and then went on, "You had to make examples of certain individuals, whose names you then removed from your notebook! I congratulate you on your presentation of these cases, madam. I presume your poor filled in the details?"

A snarl from Iskander frightened the old lady and she lifted the folds of her chuddar over her face. Chafik once again was reminded of his son's retreat under the bedclothes. "For shame, Joseph!" he chided.

"But she makes me so angry!" complained the café proprietor. "The people tell her everything, and she goes around with her notebook and bag of denouncements and we have to pay. Look at what she wished to sell me" — he showed the Inspector three typewritten sheets — "for five thousand dinars!"

"A small sum for your neck. But I am shocked that madam should have offered to keep silent about murder."

"My poor," said the old lady with spirit, "might have benefited. The law, hanging a bad man, helps neither the living nor the dead."

"You see, Inspector?" said Iskander. "She has no respect for either of us! What is truly troublesome is that we have been unable to cut her throat because of her mob," he went on confidentially.

Chafik frowned; he remembered the empty streets. "I did not see her friends tonight," he said.

"I expected her this evening," Iskander told him. "I sent my men out to beat the heads of those who watch over her. I regret that they also beat your head —"

Chafik touched the sore spot and then fumbled for cigarettes; he had none and exclaimed, "I must smoke!"

The fat man made a contented sound. "So I have *Binti Ma'mum* and I have you, and neither her mob nor your police know where you are."

"I need cigarettes," Chafik said in the complaining voice of a small boy.

"My café has plenty —"

"Not my brand!"

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"A condemned man is permitted small luxuries; we will get your brand." Iskander beckoned to one of his followers. "Wait! Who sells your cigarettes?" he asked suspiciously.

"A shop near the old bridge. Setty's place."

"Setty?" Iskander laughed. "No friend of the police, that one! Get the Inspector what he wants," he told the waiting man.

Chafik called the man back. "I desire to buy my own," he said with dignity and took a folded bill from his wallet. "I take nothing from murderers, nothing!" he added with a reproachful look at the Lady of Good Deeds. The old woman made a protesting gesture and the Inspector took her hand and patted it gently, forgivingly.

When the messenger returned with the cigarettes and the change from the dinar, Chafik returned the change, saying, "A fee for the executioner!"

So they sat, the old lady with her hands clasped, Iskander nursing his stomach, and the Inspector moving only to put the butt of a cigarette in an ashtray. Eventually Chafik asked, "What do you propose, Joseph?"

"The river," Iskander told him. "But let us wait until Baghdad sleeps, my friend."

Chafik added another butt to the tray — he had stacked them like logs — then he looked at his watch and said, "It is already tomorrow." He remembered the breakfast-table conversation with Faisal, and now he said with the wistfulness of remembrance, "What *was* the significance of tomorrow?"

A man came in and announced, "It's all quiet and the boat is waiting."

The Inspector put out his cigarette and reached for the tray. Iskander, rising, took it away and said, "Such a tidy man! All Baghdad knows how you pile the butts of your cigarettes!" He shook a reproving finger and added, "No clues! All this goes into the river with you."

The knuckles of Chafik's left hand touched his forehead in the Moslem's gesture of accepting his fate. "Let us go," he said to Madam Aliya and offered her his arm.

The rear door of the Café of the Abundant Fruits opened on the mud flats of the Tigris. There was no moon, only the stars lighted the night, and it was so quiet that the sound of water rippling against the poles that marked the main channel seemed unnecessarily loud.

Iskander struck a match to guide the escort and prisoners.

A beam of light came from the middle of the river, swept the bank, and found the boat where it was being steadied by a waiting oarsman. A yellow flame stabbed from the dark and was followed by the sound of a gun.

Joseph Iskander put his hands to his stomach and pitched forward into the mud. Chafik grasped the old lady and threw her down and lay beside her, saying, "Madam, please be still! You will do much for your poor in the future — with certain changes in your methods."

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There was more shooting, and then somebody shouted, "Sir? Sir?" The light of the police boat moored in the middle of the stream continued to search the mud flat.

The Inspector got up and called, "All is well, Abdullah. Kindly do not bleat at me, and put your gun away."

He lighted a cigarette and went over to Iskander. The fat man was alive, but his round face was contorted by pain, and he held his stomach where the bullet had hit.

The Inspector gave him the cigarette. "A very special brand, Joseph," he said.

Iskander complained, "But all is so unjust! I had you both and surely no one knew it. Yet your Abdullah and the police came. How?"

"One of your excellent counterfeit bills, Joseph. *Binti Ma'mum* had given one of them to my son, from whom I recovered it — and it was that one I gave to your man to buy me cigarettes! Setty —"

"No friend of the police is that one! Why did he warn —" Iskander bit his lips in sudden pain.

"There was a prior incident with a bird —" Chafik commenced to tell the fat man, but the explanation came too late. "Such a waste!" said the Inspector, as he took the cigarette, which had fallen from the dying man's lips, and threw it away.

When he came home to the house on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings, it was dawn, and his wife Leila had returned from her visit. The small dark woman, who wore an expression of acquiescence that was to be expected of the wife of Chafik J. Chafik, extended her arms to him. "I did not expect to find you in such disorder," she said, with reference to his muddied clothes.

"That can be remedied," he said, embracing her. "What needs immediate attention," he added, pausing in enjoyment of his wife's perfumed hair, "is to understand the significance of today —"

"Today?" Leila repeated.

"Yes, today! It was tomorrow, yesterday — so confusing! But today is what I ask you about. Why, for example, did our son need a dinar for the tomorrow today? His persistence eventually produced the clue that enabled me —"

Leila said, "As a detective you may be reasonable, but you are unreasonable as a father with a son. Faisal — and it is my fault. I forgot before I went away — needed money to buy you something for the tomorrow which is now today."

"Eh?" shouted the little man.

"I should not tell you, but he has a tie for you," whispered the small dark woman. "A beautiful foulard tie, my man! We — Faisal and I — know how you have admired it in that shop window. So go to Faisal; he awaits with the gift."

She took his ears, pulled his head down, and kissed him. "Fool!" she said. "Don't you understand that this tomorrow, which has gloriously become today, is your birthday?"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOSEPH WHITEHILL**

TITLE: ***Square-o-Rooney***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: A city in the United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Gas-station attendant Harve was considered a square — by the three boys in the lavender and green jalopy, and, if the truth must be told, by his wife and his boss; but a square is as a square does . . .*

IT WAS sultry summer dusk in one of the poorer suburbs of the city. Harve Culler, alone in the shoddy two-bay service station at this hour of empty streets and little business, had just turned on the bug-drawing lights in the white glass heads of the gasoline pumps, and was hosing down the cracked and stained concrete of the driveway. The driveway was no dirtier than usual tonight; Harve's purpose was not to clean it, but to cool it down and make it stop radiating its stored day-heat.

When the driveway and the apron were wet all over, Harve twisted the brass hose nozzle until the hard stream of water diminished to a fine spray; then he bent his bony body forward, closed his eyes, and held his breath, playing the cold tickling water up into his sallow, grease-speckled face. His lank, clay-colored hair fell forward and joined in the wetting.

Harve Culler was twenty-three years old, the father of two little girls, and was the only employee of his boss, Henry Hall.

He was morbidly afraid of a certain one-gallon anti-freeze can that sat among its fellows on a high shelf at the back of the grease bay, over the rack of recapped tires. Nineteen weeks ago he had found this can empty in the trash, had cut the top partly out of it, and had put it high on the shelf among the full, sealed cans just like it. That same week, by judiciously failing to ring up certain cash sales, he had netted from the cash register an unmissed five-dollar bill which he had deposited in the empty anti-freeze can. Now, nineteen weeks

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later, there were nineteen five-dollar bills in the can.

Harve jerked his head to flip the free water out of his hair, and straightened with a tired sigh. Wiping his face on the cleanest part of his coverall arm as he went, he dragged the heavy red hose back into the wash bay and coiled it down on the concrete floor. He looked intently down at what he was doing to avoid looking up at the shelf where the anti-freeze cans were. His can, the one that worried him, had lately begun to seem conspicuous to him, as though it had somehow taken on an invisible glow of its own because of its outlaw contents.

He gave a little guilty start as the pay telephone rang in the office. He dropped the hose with an irritated "Damn," and went into the office to answer. He wiped his hands on the seat of his coveralls before he took down the receiver. "Hall's Service," he said.

"Harve honey?" It was his wife.

"Yeah. Hi, Della."

"You busy, Harve?"

"No. Just cleanin' up around."

"Is anyone there?"

"Nope, huh-uh. I got it all to myself."

"I just got the girls to bed and I was kind of lonesome."

"Why don't you look at the teevee?"

"It quit working again right after supper."

"Did you try slappin' it over on the side again?"

"Slap it! I been slappin' it till my hand hurts. We got to get it fixed right, that's all there is to it. What about that guy you know who fixes radios and things out in his garage? He's cheap, isn't he?"

"Schultz, you mean? He *was* cheap, all right. But he's gone out of business now. Somebody found out all them car radios he was sellin' for twenty-thirty dollars was hot."

"Hot?"

"Sure-hot. Stole."

"Oh. Well, somebody else, then. Just let's get it fixed is all."

"Okay . . . well —" Fearing that Della had some graver reason for calling, Harve tried dispiritedly to ease the conversation shut. Through the flyspecked window that looked into the grease bay, Harve could just see the far end of the high shelf which held the gallon cans of anti-freeze. He gnawed the edge of his lower lip.

Della asked with sweet determination, "You talk to Mister Hall today?"

"Sure. Uh — what about?"

"You know what about. About what we were talkin' about last night. That raise."

"Raise? Well, no. No, I didn't. We — uh — we was awful busy today, and one of them guaranteed batteries come back dead and cost him eleven bucks, so he wasn't in any temper to talk about raises. Or nothin'. I'll do it, though, don't you worry."

"Harvey Culler." Della's voice was cold.

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"What?"

"I hate to say this, but I think you're yellow."

Harve's voice climbed in pitch. "I'm not yellow. It just wasn't the right time to talk raises, that's all."

"Six months of this. It never's the right time with you, Harvey dear."

"All right now, you quit talkin' like that. You just don't know Mister Hall. He's got a lot of trouble runnin' this place."

"Sure he does. Oh, dear me yes he does. How about if I come down there tomorrow afternoon and *meet* your Mister Hall that you take such good care of, and I'll say, 'How de do, Mister Hall. My name is Della Culler, and that's my 'fraidy-cat husband over there washing that car for you.' And then I'll say, 'Mister Hall, my husband thinks too *much* of you to bother you about *money*, so I came down to ask you about that five-dollar raise you promised him *six* months ago.' How about that, huh, Harve? How'd you like that?"

"Now wait a minute, Della. I'm doin' this in my own time. There's no sense hurryin' him. He'll be feelin' good one of these days, and *then* I'll hit him up. You'll see. Besides — uh — that other's goin' along all right. Real smooth." Harve turned from the wall where the telephone was and looked about the office for assurance that he was still alone.

"Sure," Della said. "Sure. It's goin' along real smooth, but *I* haven't seen any of it. How do I know you're not just making all that up? The girls need shoes again and we have to get the teevee fixed and I need curtain material, but you keep it all down there at the station. What good's it doin' down there?"

"Well, it's buildin' up every week, honey. That's what it's doin'. There's nineteen of 'em in there now."

"That's fine. Bring 'em all home tonight and show me."

"Hey, whoa now! We was goin' to wait till we saw whether he'd give me the raise. There ain't any sweat, you know, Della."

"Wait, wait, *wait!* All the time wait. I'm *sick* of waiting."

"You know, there's a lot of difference between just stashin' it away here on the station property, and *takin'* it away. A lot of legal difference."

"I don't care. I'm sick of this —"

Harve looked around wildly as the call bell rang out over his head. A car had driven into the station and passed over the Call Boy pneumatic hose. Harve turned to face the wall. "I can't talk any more, hon — a car just come in."

"I said I'm *sick* of all this waiting. You better bring home that money — tonight."

A wheezy musical honking, like a calliope's, sounded from the car in the drive. Harve said hurriedly, "All right, all right, I'll bring it home. 'Bye." The receiver was still talking in clicky metallic tones as he hung it up. He wiped his sweating hands on a pink Kex cloth and went out to the waiting car.

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"Yes, sir?" Harve said, looking at the car. It was a 1942 two-door Ford sedan, hard used past the age of pretension. It was painted lavender, with green fenders and white rear fender skirts. It was fitted with artificial Buick-holes in the sides of the hood, a miniature television dipole on its bent radio antenna, and twin mufflers that boomed with a hollow drumming note. One fender was cracked where the sheet metal had been poorly beaten out after a denting, and the crack gaped and trembled in rhythm with the rough grumble of the idling engine. Though the car was not properly a hot rod, its rear end had been lowered so far that its bustle appeared to drag on the concrete. Harve had seen the car two or three times during the past weeks, each time with the same three boys for occupants.

Stopping the engine, the driver said, "Juice us, Dad." He was a good-looking youth with long blond hair and a curling lip.

Harve knew better than needlessly to pour irretrievable gasoline into this security risk, so he asked, "How much you want, *Dad*?"

"How much I want, this guy wants to know? Hey, Buzz, come out of it!" The driver leaned back and shook the sleeper in the car's rear seat.

The sleeper stirred: "Gua-a-a-ah?"

"How much gas we want? Turn out your pocket. *Come* on. You been to the Agency today. You got change, so let's see it." While Buzz heaved his body, then groped and fumbled in his pocket, the driver turned to his seat mate. "You too, Hick. Lessee yours."

"Aing got any. Spennit." Hick's voice was high and nasal.

"Spent it! What'd you spend it on, for Pete's sake? No. Don't tell me. I know. *Grass!*"

"Ya-a-ah," Hick said, giggling. Then he lunged suddenly across the seat between the driver and the steering wheel, stuck his head out the window, and leered at Harve. An eye-tooth was missing from the smile. "Hey, Square, looka. Looka this." Hick held out a thin, ill-made cigarette which had charred unevenly down one side. "You know what this is, Square?"

"I got an idea," Harve said, taking a step backward.

The driver punched Hick lightly in the ribs. "Get off me, damn it. You oughtn't to be flashin' that stuff around anyway. Siddown!"

Hick withdrew his head glumly and crawled back to his place. "Andy," he whined, "you never lemme have no fun with these squares."

"You got your own kind of fun," Andy said, counting the change he had collected. He handed it to Harve. "Here, Square. Stick in forty-two cents' worth."

Have took the change. "Regular or ethyl?"

"Are you kiddin'? This heap would choke on ethyl." Harve started toward the pump. Andy's voice followed him: "Hey, Square, hey!"

Harve stopped and turned. "What?"

"Hold up that hose afterwards, too, Square. I want it all."

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"Okay," Harve said. The next gasoline customer would thus be cheated of the tenth of a gallon that ordinarily remained in the hose, but Harve was not disposed to argue. The sooner he was rid of these boys and their lavender car, the better.

After he had run in the measured gasoline, and while he was tightening the filler cap, a rubber dwarf perched on the rear license plate popped out its red rubber tongue at him and made an obscene blatting noise. Startled into thoughtlessness, Harve automatically stuck out his own tongue in return. The boys in the car jeered and brayed. Harve set his lips and slammed the hose nozzle hard into its switch-hook on the pump. He walked around to the driver's window and asked in a flat voice, "Check the oil?"

The long-haired driver, Andy, answered, "Why? What good would *that* do?" Harve slanted his head to the side and shrugged. Andy asked, "Hey, Square, how late you stay open?"

Harve said, "It depends."

"On what, man, on what?"

"I have to keep open till the movie down there lets out. I get two-three sales every night from the people that's been to the show."

"Two-three sales! Say, now, ain't that great? You all hear that? Square here has to keep this dump open every night till the show lets out just to nail two-three sales." Andy squinted up at Harve. "Hey, Square, how much they pay you here?"

Harve hesitated, licking his lips. "What do you want to know for? What do you care?"

"What do *I* care? Well, I might decide some day to pump gas for a livin' and turn into a square like you."

Hick, on the other side of the front seat, said in his yodeler's voice, "Come on, Square-o-rooney, tell ol' Andy whatcha make."

Harve pretended not to have heard the marijuana smoker. "Well, it seems to me that's my business, but I don't mind telling. I started at thirty-seven fifty and commissions on grease and oil. But I — but I got me a five-dollar raise a while back."

Andy raised his eyebrows. "*Sa-a-a-ay* now. You must be rollin' in it by now, huh? Whadda you drive? A Caddie? No. I bet it's a Jag you drive, ain't it? Whadda you drive, Square?"

"I don't have a car. I walk. I got a wife and two kids."

Andy clucked sympathetically. "Too bad. Tough luck." He ground the starter until the engine caught with an enraged bellow; then, with a gong-like clang from the transmission, he dropped the shift into low gear. "See you around, Square. Don't spend it all in one place!" The three boys' heads snapped back as the lavendar car lurched forward on yelping tires and plunged out into the empty street, trailing twin streams of blue smoke.

Exhausted from the strain of the conversation, Harve stood by the pump island until the thrilling drum-note of the car's mufflers passed out

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of earshot; then he went into the office and sat down in the play-jointed chair by the desk.

Just look at the fun those guys have, he thought. They're free. I'm not much older than them, and look where *I* am . . . Five-dollar raise . . . Yeah, sure. Raised right out of the cash register, you mean. Oh, hell.

The June bugs had begun to pelt the heads of the gasoline pumps outside, hitting the glass globes with chitinous cracking sounds, then falling stunned to the concrete. They lay there on the worn concrete waving their legs in feeble objection until fortune righted them again; then they crawled off into the dark to gather their strength for another venture and another failure.

Over and over again.

While Harve watched through the open door, one of these beetles took a wrong course in crawling away from the pump, and headed straight through the door toward him. Watching its approach with blank eyes, Harve did not move until it had almost reached his foot. Then he lifted his toe from the floor. When the unknowing June bug had crawled well under, Harve let his foot down slowly until he felt the springy shell of the bug beneath his shoe. He applied increasing pressure until the crisp fracturing sound came, then he lifted his foot away to look. Although flattened, the June bug began to crawl on, dragging a wing that protruded from its splayed wing case. Harve tapped the bug lightly with his shoe again, hearing a solider crunching of graver injury, then he looked again. The June bug had stopped crawling and was waving one leg as it lay drowning in its own syrup. Expressionless, Harve stood up and squashed the beetle flat, then scraped its remains out the door with the edge of his shoe sole.

Five-dollar raise.

To pass the time until the neighborhood theater let out, Harve set about straightening the dusty tool and accessory stock in the office. He was half done when the telephone rang. "Hall's Service."

"Harve? Hello, Harve? This is Mister Hall . . . Well, how's it go-going tonight?"

"Hello, Mister Hall." Harve spoke with brightly guilty alertness. "Not so good. It's been pretty slow, but the show hasn't let out yet, though."

"Yes, sure. Well, now, did you have any washes this afternoon?"

"Two is all."

"Fine. I like washes, don't you? All you have to use is nice cheap water."

"That's right," Harve said. Yeah, he thought, *nice cheap water and my tired right arm.*

"Any lubes?"

"No, sir."

"Well, don't you worry. Things'll get busier." Mr. Hall's soft laugh sounded tinny in the receiver. "They can't get much worse, can they? You know, Harve, I wonder sometimes who it is in all this national

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prosperity they talk about that's making all the money?"

"Maybe we ought to have a sale or somethin'," Harve said.

"A sale? Sales are a joke. Let's say you decide to have a sale on flashlights. Fine. Good idea. So all the people come from miles around and they buy your flashlights that you're losing a nickel apiece on, and they don't buy anything else, and they go away and you never see them again. Unless you decide to have a sale on pliers or friction tape, that is. Then the same people all come back and buy your pliers and friction tape and go away again till next time . . . Say, Harve, did I tell you about the grease pot?"

"No, sir." Harve picked grains of sand out of the wall plaster with his black-rimmed fingernails.

"Well, it was about empty when I did that Dodge this noon. Would you fill it, please?"

"Sure. How much you want in it?"

"Oh, whatever it'll take. Twenty pounds or so . . . Yes, and don't forget to lock up the gas pumps, will you?"

"Okay."

"How much is in the cash register?"

Harve's heart jumped unaccountably. "You want me to go count it?"

"No, no. Just *about* how much?"

"About thirty-five dollars or so. That teacher over at the school come in and paid down the last of the money on that recap of his."

"He owed eight dollars. Is that what he gave you?"

"Yeah. I gave him his receipt. You want me to take the cash box home?"

"I guess not. It's not worth it. Just lock it up in the men's room as usual."

"All right."

"Well, good night, Harve. See you tomorrow."

"Mister Hall . . ." Harve took a breath.

"Hmm?"

"Uh — Mister Hall, remember six months ago we talked about . . . uh . . . about a raise for me? I was just wondering if you'd forgot?"

"Raise? Oh. No, I haven't forgotten it. I want to give it to you — you know that, don't you? But you know what business has been, don't you? We can talk about it tomorrow, can't we?"

"All right."

"Sure. Well, good night, Harve."

"G'night, Mister Hall." Harve balanced the telephone receiver erect on the palm of his hand, then let it topple like a diver into the hook.

To minimize the June bug invasion, Harve turned on only one of the overhead lights in the grease bay, then he dragged the five-gallon drum of gun grease out into the open floor where he could work on it handily. While he pried off the lid of the drum, he glanced up at the special, important anti-freeze can on the high shelf, and he nodded his head decisively.

When he loosened the wing nuts that held the presure lid on the squat, cast-aluminum grease pot, the air

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inside pushed the lid up with a sticky *plup* sound. After a short search in a bin he found the wooden grease spatula and, crouching between the drum and the greasing machine container, he spooned out great dollops of the glossy amber grease and scraped them into the empty pot, taking care to entrap no air bubbles as he pushed the mass down the inside wall of the pot.

Sure, Mr. Tightwad Hall, he thought as he worked. Sure I'll fill your grease pot. Sure I'll lock up your gas pumps. Sure I'll hide your cash box. Sure. I'll do anything you ask, I will. Me? No, *I* don't need nothing. My little girls *like* to go barefoot. I *like* to walk wherever I go. I ain't got any place to go anyhow. Damn it all, you'd think there was a depression on or something!

The operation of refilling the grease pot tended always to have a soothing effect on Harve, and the tactile business of dipping, spreading, smoothing, and sculpturing the slippery yielding grease filled him with a kind of creative joy he had no name for. He knew only that this was the one job around the station that he habitually stretched out as long as he could.

He was interrupted three times in his rhythmic manipulations, twice by gas-thirsty cars from the parking lot of the movie theater, and once when a clumsy blind June bug flew like a fired projectile into the pot and he had to stop to fish it out.

After he had replaced the pressure lid on the pot and had skidded back the drum of unused grease, he stepped out into the driveway and peered up the empty street toward the now dark-fronted theater. A man on a high stepladder with a case of marquee type was taking down the old title and putting up a new one. The show was over.

Harve went back into the grease bay on legs that seemed to have grown limber and flimsy; he was commencing to feel somewhat sick, somewhat buzzy and taut on his stomach-to-head axis. He pulled down both of the rattly, roller-hung doors and locked them, then switched out the lights in the gasoline pumps. He took two heavy padlocks out to the pump island and locked the hoze nozzles to their switch-hooks. Then he returned to the office.

Well, here goes . . .

Stepping through the door into the gloomy grease bay, he dragged a short ladder over to the back wall and leaned it against the rack of recapped tires. He climbed it unsteadily until he could reach the shelf where the anti-freeze cans were stored. Ritualistically, in experimental fashion, he tilted each full and heavy can in turn until he came to the light one, which he took down. The can rustled as he held it. He closed up the ranks of the cans remaining on the shelf and climbed back down the ladder. He put the ladder away where he had found it and carried the can into the office.

He put it on the littered desk in

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the corner and stared into it bemusedly, trying to count the number of bills there without touching them. Then a quick frown crossed his face and his lips thinned. He had forgotten to lock the cash box in the men's room. Feeling about in the dust on top of the cigarette machine, he found the wooden paddle from which hung the key to the men's room and took it down. He was halfway to the cash register, and was facing the rear wall of the office where the telephone and the men's room door were, when the voice came.

"Stick 'em up, Dad."

Harve came to a smooth, fluid standstill and raised his arms. Warm fear-liquid flooded his bowels as he stood there rigid, a queer crawling sensation spreading through him. He had never been held at gunpoint before. "What the —" he began. He had to clear his throat to make his speech intelligible. "What do you want me to do?" Harve stared fixedly at a dirt smear on the wall beside the telephone, and he composed himself to obey to the letter. He had heard that it was suicide to try to look at holdup men. He had no need to look, anyway. He knew very well who was behind him.

"Stick your head in the corner over by the phone. Hurry it up."

Harve did as he was told.

"All right, now, arms behind your back and grab your elbows."

Harve did this too, though it was not easy in his bulky coveralls.

"What's that key you got there, Dad?"

"Men's room."

"Well, hang onto it a minute."

There was the sound of shuffling feet, and of other persons entering the office. Someone rang the No Sale key of the cash register, then a nervous, nasal voice swore, ". . . makes enough racket you can hear it in town!"

"Shut up. It's only your hopped-up ears. How much is there?"

"You want I should stop and *count* it?"

"Don't be funny. Is there all there should be?"

"There ain't much. Thirty-forty dollars."

Someone fetched Harve a jarring kick in the buttocks. His neck snapped forward, and his forehead scraped the rough plaster wall. He nearly slid to the floor. "Hey, Square, is this all there is?"

Harve swallowed. His ears felt as if they were afire. *Oh, God, suppose I tell them that's all, and then they look inside the can? What would happen to me then? You have to be awful nice to guys with guns.*

"Hey, Square, how about it? You hear what I ast you?"

Damn that money anyway. Damn them five-dollar bills all to hell. Damn Della. Damn me. Damn the whole dumb idea, that's all. "N-no," Harve stammered. *Who wants that kind of money anyhow?* He cleared his throat and said in a fast low whisper, "Look. Look over there on the desk. Inside

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that can." Harve let his head sink forward, and pressed his face into the plastered corner.

"What? Talk up, Square!"

"I said look inside that can on the desk!" Harve shouted to the wall. *There. It's all gone. All over and done with.*

There came a rush of hurried feet behind him in the office. "Well, whadda you know! They keep their dough in cans around this dump. Is this all of it, Square?"

"That's all."

"How do I know this is all?"

"I *swear* it is." With his head hard in the corner, Harve's voice sounded loud and strange in his own ears. His buttocks felt warm, as though he were bleeding there from the kick.

"*Hey!*" A sharp slap sounded. "Get your hands off that junk. Leave it be. We don't want no hardware, hear?"

"Aw — Okay." Some accessory or other clanked back into the display rack.

"Come on. Let's blow."

"What're we gonna do with Square here?"

The nasal voice came again. "Might shoot him."

Harve sagged forward against the wall. *Oh, God.* "N-no. Please, fellas."

There were several giggles, then something hard poked into Harve's back, high between his shoulder blades. "Hey, Square, you don't know who we are, do you?"

"No, no. That's right. I haven't seen you."

"That's right all right. That's just what you're gonna tell the cops, too, ain't it? Remember, we got lots of friends."

"Sure. Sure you do. That's right."

"Okay. Gimme that key." The key was snatched out of Harve's hand from behind. "Now get in the john there."

Obeying, Harve took a step to the side to find the door to the men's room. Just as he opened it, another kick in the buttocks, even more vicious than the previous one, shot him flail-armed and stumbling into the dark little room, where he collapsed on the concrete floor. The door slammed behind him and the key rattled in the lock. Then footsteps went away.

In the dark, Harve helped himself to his feet by hanging from the rim of the wash basin, and he made a hissing gasp through his teeth at the racking pain in his haunches. He had to stand with his knees partly bent, in a sort of rickety crouch, for something at the bottom of his spine felt broken. He groped blindly before his face for the light cord until it brushed his hand; then he caught it and switched on the light. He waited, listening.

At length he heard the noise he was waiting for, the noise he must have heard before without realizing it — the angry, great-throated drumming of a pair of Hollywood mufflers. Harve waited while the sound went up through gears and faded away altogether, then he hobbled to the

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little window, the lower half of which was glazed with starred privacy-glass, unlocked it, and pulled himself shoulders-first through it. He broke his fall with his hands and rolled over in the uncut weeds; then, steadying himself with an arm out to the wall of the station, he made his way around to the front door of the office.

The thieves had left the drawer of the cash register open, and they had taken none of the silver. With numb and trembling fingers, Harve picked up a coin and dropped it into the right eye of the pay telephone. On the card of emergency numbers pasted to the front of the telephone he found a line that began POLICE, and he mouthed the numbers as he dialed. The receiver purred twice, then a man answered: "Police Station. Precinct Twelve. Sergeant Banks."

"Hello, Police? Police?"

"Police Station."

"Hello. Uh — this is — uh — this is Harve . . . Harve Culler over at Hall's Service. I just been robbed, sir."

"You just been robbed or the service station just been robbed."

"The station."

"Where are you?"

"At the station."

"I *know* that! I mean where's the *station?*"

"Oh. I'm sorry. Ninth and Garrison."

"All right. Wait there. I'll have a car over. How many of 'em were there?"

"How many what?"

"Oh, sweet . . . How many guys robbed you?"

"I'm not sure. They stuck my head in a corner and I didn't get a look. Three or four, I guess."

"See their car?"

"No. They locked me in the john."

"All right. They'll be a car over in a few minutes."

"Uh — Is it all right if I call my boss?"

"What? Your boss? Sure call him. Goodbye."

Harve hung up the receiver gently. He took two more coins from the cash drawer, and with one he bought himself a Coke from the bulbous red machine. With the other he called Mr. Hall's house. While he waited for an answer, Harve rubbed his buttocks lightly up and down the wall at his back to soothe them.

Mr. Hall answered, "Hello?"

"Mister Hall, this is Harve down at the station. Some guys was just here and robbed us."

"*What!* Oh-my-lord! Are you all right? Oh-my-gosh! Did they hurt you any, Harve?"

"They kicked me a couple of times is all."

"Did you call the police yet?"

"Yeah. They're on their way."

"Are you sure you're all right, Harve? You don't sound all right."

"Sure. I'm fine. I owe you a nickel, though."

"What say? A nickel? What for?"

"Well, those guys left all the change so I bought myself a Coke."

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"Oh, Harve. For heaven's sake. Forget it. I'll be right on down there."

"Okay. 'Bye."

"Goodbye."

Harve lowered himself tenderly into the chair by the desk to wait. "Goodby-o-rooney," he said aloud, to hear how it sounded when *he* said it. "Okay-o-rooney." He grinned tiredly and took a suck-tongued pull at the Coke. He put the empty anti-freeze can on the floor beside him and spat into it. *Nineteen weeks at five dollars a week is what I get paid for all them creeping jitters. Fun? was it I said? Them kids carried off all my fun. Nineteen fun-dollar bills. Me, I am a very unfunny happy guy now. To hell with their kind of fun.* He squinted, aimed, and spat again into the empty anti-freeze can, then broke into a broad grin and leaned back carefully . . .

After the police had come and looked and talked, and had gone away again, Mr. Hall locked up the station and considerately drove Harve home. He drove slowly, with street-picking caution, so the car would not bounce too severely and make Harve's pain worse. As they pulled up before Harve's shabby little house, Mr. Hall said, "Why don't you take tomorrow off? You're going to be awfully stiff, I'll bet."

Harve thought a moment. "Well, okay, but tomorrow was when I was gonna talk to you about that raise."

Mr. Hall laughed. "We'll talk about it the day after. I'll even remind you. Eh? Fair enough?"

"Thanks, Mister Hall." For some queer reason that Harve could not understand, a knot came into his throat now.

"You want me to help you to the house?"

"Naw. It's all right. I'll make it."

"Well, then, good night."

"Good night, Mister Hall." Harve winced as he climbed the two steps to the loose-boarded porch. He had to climb sideways, holding onto the post.

Della — a small girl running to fat in the middle but still young-skinned — met him at the door. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, then put on a little pout and held her hand out to him palm up. "Put it right there, Big Boy."

Harve leaned against the door jamb. "There ain't any any more."

"Wha-a-a-at?"

"I'm not kiddin'. There ain't any. We got robbed. The station got robbed, I mean. I had it all out to bring home and they come in and took it. Took everything."

Della stepped back into the little flower-papered living room and put her hands on her hips. "I'll say one thing for you, Harvey Culler. When you do lie you think up a good one!"

Harve limped with shortened steps toward his sag-bottomed reading chair and lowered himself gingerly into it, supporting all his weight on his arms.

Della noticed. "What's the matter with you? Why're you walking like that?"

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Harve did not answer. Moving in slow caution, so as not to come upon some new angle of hurt by surprise, Harve extended each leg in turn and settled into the hammock-like comfort of his chair. He looked at the toes of his grease-sodden work shoes. "Gimme a beer," he said flatly.

"You know where it is," Della said. "Go get it yourself." Harve raised his head and looked at her as she stood in front of him. Her arms twitched once, then she took her hands off her hips.

Harve said evenly, "You hear me, Della? You hear what I said? I said gimme a beer. Give. Me. A. Beer. Or I'll bust you one."

Her jaw dropped, her eyes widened a little, and she swayed in hesitation. Then she flounced out to the kitchen. After a moment she brought back a can of beer with fresh white foam welling from the two triangular holes in its top. She handed it to him with her arm out straight, as though she were afraid to come too near. Then she went and sat down on the couch, folded her hands in her lap, and stared suspiciously at him.

For some minutes Harve sat silent, lipping the edge of the beer can and scowling whenever a dark cloud crossed his thoughts. Della watched him tensely; then, unable to contain herself any longer, she said, "What's wrong with you, Harve?" There was a gentler note in her voice than Harve had heard from Della in a long time.

Harve raised his eyes. "Wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong. I lied to them cops and I lied to Mister Hall, that's what's wrong. It ain't right to lie to Mister Hall or to the cops. I knew who them kids was all along. They ought to be caught." Harve gestured with his thumb. "Reach me that phone, will you? And the phone book, too."

"Yes, Master," Della said, but her sarcasm sounded thin and forced. She put the telephone on the arm of his chair and placed the directory in his lap. As she crossed back to the couch she said matter-of-factly to the walls, "I think you're crazy."

Ignoring her, Harve found the number he wanted on the *In Case of Emergency* page, and, holding the telephone awkwardly on his thigh, he dialed. After two rings the answer came: "Police Station. Precinct Twelve. Sergeant Banks."

"This is Harve Culler again. I'm the guy that just got stuck up over at Hall's Service. I want to talk to the cop I talked to before, over at the gas station."

"Just a minute. I'll see if he's here."

Harve sipped his beer while he waited. Soon another voice spoke: "Hello? This is Sergeant Jonas. What is it?"

"This is Harve Culler again, Sergeant. I been thinkin' about that stickup, and I just remembered somethin' that might help."

"Such as?"

"Well, while I was locked in the can I heard their car drive off. It had that funny sound that Hollywood mufflers

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make. Kind of hollow. You know what I mean?"

"Sure. Yeah. But there's lots of cars in town with those mufflers on 'em."

"Yeah, but earlier tonight I had a car come in the station that had 'em. They was three kids in it, and — and they acted real curious about the station like when I lock up at night and so on. I think one of the kids was on marijuana."

"Wait a second! Let me get something to write this down on."

Harve said "Excuse me —" into the telephone, then he looked at Della who was signaling frantically to him with her arms. She motioned for him to cover the mouthpiece with his hand. He turned the transmitter against his thigh.

"Listen, Harve," she whispered in panicky intentness, "if they find that extra money on those kids you're going to be in awful trouble!"

"You just figure that out?" Harve asked softly, with a small, quick smile. "We'll just have to take our chances, is all. I'm through with all that business, hon — through, you hear?"

"Oh, *Harve*!" Della wailed.

"Hello, Sergeant?" Harve said into the telephone.

"Go ahead, I'm ready now," the sergeant said.

And Harve, the Square, began to reel off details.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **AVRAM DAVIDSON**

TITLE: ***The Ikon of Elijah***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Island of Cyprus

COMMENTS: *Watch Mr. Davidson: he has the gift — the precious gift of words and insight. In this story he creates a scoundrel and brings an alien culture to life. Yes, watch Mr. Davidson: we at EQMM expect truly fine stories from him.*

ON A WET AFTERNOON IN EARLY winter a small and mud-splashed automobile entered Nicosia through the Paphos Gate and made its way through Sultan Solyman Square, Queen Irene Street, Ledra Street, and, finally, through a back alley which had neither name nor paving to speak of. Very few people in Cyprus were feeling cheerful in the cold rain, and the driver of the car — a heavy-jowled man with snowy hair — was certainly not one of them. He cursed the rain and the people thronging the narrow streets of the capital city, Greeks and Turks and Armenians and British, with superb impartiality, but in a low voice. Drawing to a stop about halfway up the alley, he blew two short, hard blasts on his car horn, and struggled out, breathing heavily.

A door opened in the stone wall to the right, and a man wearing the high boots and baggy black pantaloons still favored by Cypriotes of the older generation hurried out. He had few teeth and gray stubble covered his cheeks and chin.

"More floods in the foothills, *Kyrios!*" he said. "People and cattle drowned, houses washed away —"

"I wish the whole damned island would wash away. Be quiet. Park the car. I won't need it again today."

"Yes, Mr. Carpius." The houseman folded himself into the little vehicle and maneuvered it slowly away, while Mr. Carpius entered the back garden of his house and closed the door behind him. The garden was not well kept, the interests of the master of the house presumably lying elsewhere; tiles clinked loosely under his rapid feet, unpruned shrubs grew to the size of small trees, moss was

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everywhere. The ground-floor windows were barred, as were the second-floor windows. There was no third floor, but if there were and if it had windows, they would certainly have been barred, too; for Mr. Carpius was a cautious man.

He let himself into the house with two keys, and passed through an enormous and shadowy kitchen, where an old woman dressed all in black was feeding chestnut wood into an ancient stove. She mumbled a greeting over her shoulder and Mr. Carpius, sniffing the aroma of lamb pilaff and stuffed grape leaves, permitted himself a little smile of anticipation, and blessed her fulsomely.

After unlocking and locking the doors of three more rooms, and passing through, Mr. Carpius came at length to a small shop fronting on a fairly busy street. His eyes flickered rapidly around it, looking for a moment with pleasure on the window:

M. CARPIUS
ANTIQUES AND OBJETS D'ART

and came to rest on a small, dark Maltese, who at once broke into a smile of obsequious welcome.

"What news, Paul?" Mr. Carpius asked, sitting in a rush-bottomed chair.

"Another terrible flood, sir —"

"Oh, damn that! Besides, I've already heard it from the houseman. What *news*?"

"Yes, sir, I understand, sir. Pray excuse me. Ah. Mr. Harari has bought the bronze camel-bells. All of them. He says he can use many more. Camel-bells are popular now — in Israel, he says. They hang them on the walls. . . . Why, sir?"

"Who cares why? Let them hang them around their necks, if they please, as long as they buy them. What else?"

"The parchment *sanjek*-map."

"Good, good." Mr. Carpius moved slightly a De Lusignan-period dagger which lay near the edge of a table. "What else?"

"And all six of the silver *denarii* of Tiberius, sir."

"*Ex*-cellent! I am very pleased, Paul," Mr. Carpius said benignly. Paul writhed in gratification. A sudden afterthought struck his employer. "At the prices marked?" he snapped.

"Oh, yes, sir!" Paul assured him, in haste. "Minus the usual ten per cent deduction for dealers," he added nervously; but Carpius waved aside the usual ten per cent deduction.

"That's all right."

"And you, sir, Mr. Carpius? Did you have good luck?"

Mr. Carpius's heavy, square face, usually pink, now darkend to a mulberry-red. He scowled, and clenched his teeth.

"No, damn it! I didn't." Paul backed away and began to arrange a trayful of strings of amber beads, the sort which pious Moslems use to recite the nine-and-ninety Attributes of the Almighty, beginning with His Compassion, a quality in which Mr. Carpius was lamentably deficient. "Let

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them alone!" Carpius barked. Paul dropped one, then fell to his knees.

After swallowing what seemed to be something large and dry, and beating his stubby-fingered hand on his knee several times, Carpius finally composed himself.

"I arrived there with the twenty pounds that Yohannides had agreed on," he said, "although I was naturally prepared to go much higher. The situation appeared made to order: the chapel had been closed for so many years he'd had to break the lock to get in. The place hadn't been entered since the Diocese leased the estate to the Agricultural Department before the First World War. Imagine it!"

Carpius leaned forward, furious, then went on: "An ikon of Saint Mamas riding his lion, Eleventh Century work, and the silver cover, showing details of his life, from the reign of Isaac Comnenus, the last Greek ruler of Cyprus! Fabulous! Priceless! One dare hardly estimate the value. . . . I should have forced him to let me take it away the first time I saw it. A petty clerk in the Agricultural Department, how dared he refuse to trust me? And what happened when I got back there, after driving to the end of the island? *It was gone!*

"I could have throttled him. 'What do you mean, gone? You've sold it, you scoundrel!' I said. But by and by I saw that he was telling me the truth. *The Bishop took it!* 'For safekeeping! For forty years the Bishops didn't even know it was there, didn't think about it, care about it — now, just when I take an interest, so does the Bishop. . . . What we need Bishops for at all is something I can't see. It is just this sort of thing which causes anticlericalism."

Carpius sat back, breathing heavily, while Paul hardly breathed at all. Gradually the angry color ebbed from the antique dealer's face.

"Tomorrow," he said calmly, "I shall see what can be done about arranging to have it stolen. If nothing can be done — and, sometimes, alas, such is the case — I shall be obliged," he sighed, "to offer to sell it on commission."

He rose, flicked on the lights, and walked over to the windows. He removed a small painting of a meditative bull in a peeling gilt frame and replaced it with a set of ivory and ebony chessmen, and had just stepped back to consider the effect when two men arrived in front of the shop. Mr. Carpius muttered something short and rapid, then smiled broadly as the two men entered.

"My dear, *dear* Mr. Calloost Chiringirian!" he sang out. "*And* Major — Major — ?"

"Parslow," said the Major, a thickset, ruddy-faced man whose bulging chest was covered with rows of ribbons.

"Hello, Carpius," said Mr. Calloost Chiringirian negligently. He was a tall man in a gray astrakhan hat, and the same pelt showed at the cuffs and collars of his coat. He turned a clever, sallow, eagle-face to the shop owner, "I've brought you a customer. Major

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Parslow is his Regiment's treasurer and he is looking for a piece of silver suitable for a farewell present to Colonel Eggerton, who is being retired. Something heavy and hideous — the Colonel's taste leans towards the Edwardian, if not to say, the Victorian. Nymphs, with huge bosoms and massive buttocks, supporting an inkwell in the form of St. Paul's Cathedral — *that* sort of rubbish, Carpius. *Your* sort of rubbish."

"Mr. Chiringirian's sense of humor is famous," Carpius said bleakly.

"Quite," said Major Parslow.

Carpius snapped his fingers. "Paul," he said. Paul jumped, began to climb up a small ladder and take things down from shelves. Behind Carpius's face various emotions seethed and bubbled. He hated the suave Armenian, who had got the better of him in many a deal, and he hated him none the less for now deriding him through his merchandise. And yet he envied him with all his heart for daring to speak before Major Parslow with a boldness which he, Carpius, would never dare employ.

"Offer him a fifth of what he asks, my dear Major," the tall man was saying. "And certainly do not pay more than a third."

"I am happy," said Carpius, "to be of service to the Major. We British —"

"*You?*" the Major asked. Paul came up holding, or rather clutching, an object consisting of two silver Scotchmen in kilts, standing on a slab of marble, and supporting a clock with several dials on its enormous face.

"I was born, of all places, in Hong Kong," Carpius tittered, "and, naturally, my being a British subject by birth is my most precious possession."

"Next, of course, to your virtue," Chiringirian said. "Examine it well, Major. It is gruesome enough to please even Colonel Eggerton, and it tells the time, the day and month, the year, and the phases of the moon. . . . I have just returned today, Carpius, from a visit to Thallassaöpolis, where I paid my respects to the Bishop. A delightful man. He had me to tea."

Carpius glared, quivering.

"He wanted my advice and counsel. Would you believe it, Carpius — an ikon of St. Mamas of the Eleventh Century, and a silver cover dating from the reign of the Emperor Isaac Comnenus. . . . Lovely, lovely. He had removed it, on my advice, from a neglected chapel in the hills. We — ah — came to terms. It is now in a bank vault. How lucky I heard of it . . . dear me, Carpius, you are pale." The Armenian smiled coldly.

Carpius stared at him, livid, but he soon composed himself.

Chiringirian gestured. "This sort of rubbish you have here," he said, "would have sold well to the old Turks. They had an unfailing taste for the worst in Western Art — if, indeed, one may call it art. The Imperial Turks, the Imperial Russians, Major, they were faulty and even wicked — but when I recall the

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blood bath and holocaust which followed their overthrow —" He sighed deeply.

Carpius shrugged. *He* remembered the unrest in Russia and Asia Minor with affection. Business had never been so brisk, before or since. The loot of a thousand churches and monasteries passed through his hands. Perhaps those days might come again. Carpius gazed with sudden disgust around the crowded shop. It *was* rubbish — Chiringirian was right. He thought of jeweled crosses and golden communion spoons. One never knew what might happen, with half the peoples of Asia ready for one another's throats.

He let Major Parslow have, with barely a struggle, and at only four hundred per cent profit, a silver snuff-mull in the shape of a ram's head, with carnelian eyes: when the top was lifted a concealed music box played *Rule, Britannia.*

"Adio, Carpius," Chiringirian said, with a crooked smile. "We shall meet at Philippi — though I, personally, prefer the Riviera. After you, dear Major."

It was then time to close the shop. Paul put up the iron shutters and locked them, and was dismissed to the comfort of home and fireside, represented by his elder sister, a sharp-tongued spinster with a black mustache. Carpius turned his thoughts to old Eleftheria in the kitchen — or, more exactly, to the lamb pilaff and the stuffed grape leaves. Briefly he reflected that his dislike of his tall rival had put him in such emotional confusion that he had committed a great breach of custom: he had neglected to offer coffee — the sweet, thick, black coffee of the Levant, served in tiny cups with beaten-brass lids — without which scarcely any business deal or social call in Cyprus is conducted. But his mind quickly left this embarrassing recollection, and returned to supper and to the bottle of Commandaria which was to accompany it; and at this moment someone knocked on the shop door.

Carpius, about to switch off the lights, hesitated. Then he shrugged. "Who is there?" he called out.

"The monk Theodoros," was the answer.

"And what is it you wish?"

"I have . . . that is . . . Do you buy ikons?"

"One moment." Carpius began to unbolt the door. The chances were that the monk had some wretched modern daub to offer, in the worst style of cigar-box art; but one never knew, and besides, it was always well to make as many contacts with custodians of church property as possible.

Carpius opened the door. The monk Theodoros entered diffidently. His blue cassock was worn and patched, but the long, dark hair gathered in a bun at the back was glossy with health, and the fresh blood of youth was on his cheeks where as yet an untrimmed beard grew sparsely. Looking into the monk's eyes, Carpius received a startling impression: they were not the eyes of social man;

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they were like the eyes of some untamed bird of the hills or seas — clear and bright and focused afar off. In the Greek Church, whose priests may marry, the term of "monk" is applied to all celibate priests, including those in parish positions; but Carpius felt certain that Theodoros was not one of these.

"Which is your monastery?" the dealer asked.

"Saints Barnabas and Basil," the monk replied in a low voice.

Carpius knit his forehead in thought, "I don't believe I have ever heard of it," he said, and almost at once a vague shadow of memory arose, only to fade quickly.

"It is a small monastery. It . . . here is the ikon." The young monk began to unwrap it from a piece of oilcloth. Carpius took it. His eyes widened, then narrowed. He lifted it close to his eyes, then to his nose, then examined it again. The style was Early Byzantine, or late Hellenistic, and depicted the Prophet Elijah lifting a hand in benediction while standing in a fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses. The hands and face were that shade of gray which in the Eastern Church indicates sanctity. Across the top, in old Greek minuscules, was written: "*Prophetas Elias* ascending unto Heaven." The legend along the bottom read: "Painted by the hermit Prokopios to the glory of the Thrice-Holy and for the salvation of his soul."

"Why the paint is hardly dry on it!" Carpius said.

"Yes, it is newly done," the monk admitted, "but surely the paint is quite dry? Yes." He tested it. Carpius ignored the gesture. His mind moved warily, searching for the right words. He must not startle this shy creature, he must move warily. If what he thought was true —

"I trust," he said cautiously, "that proper care is being taken of the original. It is very old. And very holy," he added hastily.

"Oh, very holy," the monk agreed. "In all Cyprus there is no holier ikon. It is never left alone for a single moment — one monk is always engaged in prayer before it."

"Very proper. . . . What is the price of this copy?"

The price was low enough, but Carpius automatically knocked a few piasters off it. He let the young monk depart, but not without asking his blessing. It was not the dealer's intention to make too great an impression this first time, but he wanted the impression to be a favorable one. That night, after supper, and while leisurely smoking a yellow Egyptian cigarette, he questioned old Eleftheria.

The Monastery of Saints Barnabas and Basil? Oh, yes, she had heard of it, but she hardly knew what to say about it. It had not been built as a religious retreat; originally it was only a large farmhouse. She supposed that the monks were devout: they were always keeping fast days and fast periods to commemorate events everyone else had forgotten; they ate no meat, no fish, no eggs, no milk, no

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cheese; and they also mortified themselves with long vigils spent either on their feet or knees. But the fact was, they were heretics! Yes, they had thrown off the discipline of the Holy, Orthodox, and Autocephalic Church of Cyprus, if such a thing could be believed. And why? Because of the calendar. When the Archbishop had followed the Four Patriarchs in directing that the Gregorian Calendar should be adopted so that the religious date should agree with the civil date, these monks had defied him. What, adopt the innovation of a "Latin" Pope? Abandon the ancient Julian Calendar always used by the Church? Never! So, of course, they had been put under the ban, and had retreated to their Monastery. They were very poor, few in number, and, worst of all, they were said to have opposed the *enosis* movement; they had not desired union with the Motherland because the Greek government had outlawed the Julian Calendar Sect in Greece.

Carpius listened, outwardly — but only outwardly — not very interested. But after Eleftheria had tottered off to bed, he took from the bookshelf a large illustrated volume, Spendlove's *The Iconography of Cyprus*, and rapidly turned the pages. Yes, it was mentioned there. Spendlove, the greatest authority on the religious art of the island, had seen it in 1905. He described the ikon faithfully, but the monks — the ikon had then been located in a monastery near Paphos — had not permitted him to photograph it or any of their other ikons: ". . . being as yet unconvinced [wrote Spendlove] that the camera is not an invention of the devil. They have very little sense of time — all the events of Christian history seem almost contemporary to them. Constantinople has fallen only yesterday, and Alexandria (I attribute this ikon of Elijah to the Alexandrian School) only the day before. Hence the reason why they do not seem to value this particular ikon more than any other, despite its unquestionable age."

Carpius wondered how it had got from where it was then to where it is now, but the point was not important; probably it had simply been taken by one of the dissident monks — since he was not going to buy it he need not bother about a clear title. Carpius did wonder, though, why its present custodians obviously valued it more than its former owners did. He thought he knew the answer and decided to waste no more time — to leave the next day.

The monasteries of Cyprus, where so many traditions of earlier times still linger, are as open for travelers to lodge in as churches are open for them to pray in. Rooms are always kept for visitors' convenience. There is no charge made for this, or for meals, but it is customary for travelers to drop something in the pyx on leaving.

Carpius, not particularly desiring to adopt the ascetic diet of the monks,

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brought along an ample supply of provisions — canned delicacies, smoked meats, sweets, a bottle of rum. He did not know how long his stay would last, but business had fallen off so much because of the rains (Mr. Harari and Major Parslow had been the only decent customers in days) that his absence could hardly make things worse. He had not told Paul where he was going. Paul was dependable, but only up to a point: he babbled to his sister, and his sister had the longest tongue in Nicosia. Carpius would not be surprised if the sale of the ikon of St. Mamas had not contributed quite a few pounds toward her dowry — trust Chiringirian for that. Nor did Carpius desire to make himself conspicuous by taking his own car. He regretted that the railroad had been discontinued, but regrets were useless.

Jolting from side to side in the small and crowded bus, the antique dealer regretted the absence of the railroad still more. The day was misty, the curves on the mountain roads were exceedingly sharp, and the driver's habit of taking one hand off the wheel to cross himself while making each turn did nothing at all for Carpius's peace of mind. The only gratification of the ride was that the other passengers were all too busy talking to one another to notice him. There was little logic in his desire to be inconspicuous, but he felt that in order to avoid the bad luck of the St. Mamas incident he ought to go about this matter differently. There was so much more at stake this time. If the ikon of the Eleventh Century were so valuable, then the price of this earlier one almost transcended the power of estimation.

For a while Carpius managed to forget the bus. He thought of a villa in the South of France, a well furnished flat in Paris, and a certain hotel in Switzerland, where he had once stayed briefly — not a large hotel, but admirably appointed. In this pleasant dream (in which Cyprus, with its rains and mud, its turbulent population, and its few good resorts crowded during the brief season with rich and vulgar Egyptians, played no part) Carpius remained until the bus stopped suddenly and jerkily at a crossroads store. All the passengers got off, chattering loudly — some to stretch their legs, some to use the sanitary facilities, some to get coffee, some because this was their stop. Carpius got off not quite last, his bundle under his arm. He suddenly realized he had been here before. The vague memory which the monk's words, "Saints Barnabas and Basil," had aroused in his mind was based on this single visit.

While en route to the mountains one summer to sell a genuine forged Alma-Tadema to a cotton pasha at one of the hotels, he had stopped here briefly. The day had been especially clear. Some distance down the smaller road a path branched off and led to a large stone house a mile or so away. Idly he had asked what house it was and had been told, "The Monastery

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of Saints Barnabas and Basil." (The pasha had bought the Alma-Tadema. It was crowded with decorously semi-nude young men and women, the pasha's own taste tending rather toward the latter, though by no means excluding the former.)

While the passengers trooped into the combination shop and café, Carpius faded away into the mist. He had bought his ticket to the end of the line, but he did not think his absence would be noted. Sticking closely to the side of the road, he came presently to the path he remembered. He was not used to carrying bundles, or, indeed, to walking more than very short distances. It was fortunate that the route lay downhill. In less time than he would have thought, the world lay wrapped in silence. No sound from the road reached him. The trees and bushes crowded close to the path, discharging part of their moist burden upon him as he brushed by. Head down, he trudged along, and hardly noticed when he entered the monastic grounds. He came face to face with the house and stopped abruptly.

It was old and heavy and made of stone. The windows were few and narrow. Architecture was not Carpius's forte, but he thought that at least part of the structure dated from the reign of the De Lusignan dynasty, the "Latin" kings of Cyprus, before the days in the island of Genoa and Venice, and poor lost Othello. Later additions to the house had copied the same style. The roofs, which were on several levels, were mostly large slabs of mossy stone (the walls would have to be thick to support their weight), and partly tiles, black with age. Carpius knew that he could not expect plumbing, running water, electric lights or other features he had found in up-to-date, more prosperous monastic establishments. He viewed the lack of these conveniences with philosophical detachment. He could enjoy them later — in the South of France, in Paris, in the Berne-Oberlandt.

To the monk who received him he explained that he wanted to see the Archimandrite, or Father Superior. Only after presenting Carpius with a tray on which were a glass of water and a small dish of preserves — traditional symbols of hospitality — did the monk depart, his feet echoing on the stone floors until the sound of them died away. After a long time the sound began again. The Father Superior was an old man with a vast gray beard. Carpius stood up and bowed. The old man inclined his head.

"Yesterday, Archimandrite, I bought from your monk, Theodoros, an ikon of the Prophet Elijah."

"Brother Theodoros? He has not yet returned. There was nothing wrong with the ikon? Brother Constantine painted it."

"Oh, no," Carpius hastened to assure him. "It is a very good ikon. But it has troubled me that he asked so little for it."

The Archimandrite said nothing, so Carpius decided to skip the gambit

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of offering to add to the price, and continued.

"In fact, I scarcely slept the whole night. I kept thinking of the holy Prophet and how he fled into the wilderness to escape the wickedness of the priests of his day, and of the government." The old man looked up. There was a gleam of interest in his eyes. "Surely, in a place where the priests do evil and the government supports them, the people are corrupted as well." The old man nodded slowly. "When I considered the action of the Archbishop in changing the calendar," Carpius went on, "I was troubled. But I said to myself, 'Surely what this venerable and holy man does cannot be wrong?' "

The Archimandrite frowned, and Carpius hastily resumed: "But last night it came to me, as if in a vision, that he *was* wrong. What right had he to tamper with the ancient traditions of the Church, with the Julian Calendar that was good enough for the Fathers of the Church — Origen, Polycarp, Ephraim of Edessa, and the others? And I was obliged to admit — no right at all! The Established Church of Cyprus is now in a state of heresy, of apostacy! Its festivals are all on the wrong days, and hence are no festivals at all. Most reverend Archimandrite, I have come here to seek the true religion from you."

The old man's face was illuminated with joy. He stretched out his hands.

"My son," he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "you speak with the tongue of angels. You have not come here in vain."

Late that night, while Carpius was trying to compensate for the frugal supper of the monks with a late snack of deviled ham, biscuits, and brandy, he reviewed the situation. How right, how lucky and right, he had been in his guess as to why the ikon of Elijah was so venerated here. In the prophet of Israel, the short-tempered Tishbite, the dissident clerics of the monastery saw the forerunner of their own order. As Elijah had denounced false worship, so had they. As Elijah had been obliged to flee into the wilderness from the anger of authority, so had they. The only thing Carpius had not calculated was the vision which the Archimandrite had had: With tears running from his eyes, and protestations of his unworthiness, the old man described how, in a dream, Elijah appeared before him, chariot and all, holding out his mantle with the words, "Thou art cold. Cover thyself."

Actually, the monks were retreating from more than a change in calendar. They were retreating from the airplane and the jazz band and the hand grenade, the tumult and weary unrest of the present troubled age — retreating from it and turning back to the long and deep slumber of Byzantium. Off on their side road they need never even smell the fumes of an automobile. And deep in the cellar where the ikon reposed, in a special tiny chapel all to itself, no

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bigger than a dungeon cell, each monk in turn venerating upon his knees, they found the peace they sought — sweet and silent and heavy.

Carpius took the copy of the ikon from its wrapping and mentally compared it with the original. As to whether or not Spendlove had been correct in calling it Alexandrian, he could not say; but certainly it was Hellenistic. It had nothing of the rigidity or formalized stiffness which characterized later iconography; it was purely natural. Perhaps the Monk Prokopios, before his turning to the religious life, had painted many a late Roman patrician or tribune or matron; perhaps he had even done bacchanalian scenes for the walls of some pagan tavern or villa.

Putting speculation aside, Carpius rose and removed his shoes. Finding the stone floors cold to his feet, he added a second pair of socks. In one pocket went the copy painted by Brother Theodoros. In the other went a small bottle and a thick gauze pad; this might not be neccessary: very likely the monk on vigil would be dozing at this hour, in which case it would be the work of a few moments to make the exchange. But just in case . . . And if the bottle and gauze were needed, what then? They were always having visions, these monks; let him make the most of this one when he recovered. In the dim light cast by the tiny lamp, no one could tell the difference between the old ikon and the new.

Silently Carpius went through the corridors and down the steps, flashlight in hand. Here and there a monk snored, or breathed heavily in his sleep, Down, farther down, deep into the cellar, along a cold, cold hall — at last he saw ahead of him the pale glow of the tiny chapel lamp. He switched off his flashlight and crept slowly ahead. In the cell a monk crouched on his knees, elbows resting on the floor, head buried in his hands. His breath came and went, smooth and even.

"Asleep," Carpius thought, inching forward. He reached out his hand for the ikon, and in a moment — so swiftly that his eye retained no image of an intermediate picture — the monk was on his feet, howling wildly and grappling with him.

"Satan!" the monk shrieked. "Father of lies, and of thieves!"

He's an old man, Carpius thought; how does he have the strength to shout like that? And with his free hand Carpius lifted the heavy flashlight and struck.

Then, looking at the monk lying there, another thought came to him — lines from something he had once read, something an Englishmen had written: *Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?*

Perhaps the struggle had taken longer than it seemed; perhaps he stood there longer than he thought; but when he looked up he saw them at the door. Carpius stood there, stupidly, motionless. He heard their voices, saw them lift the body, felt the cold seeping through his stock-

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inged feet. One syllable began to beat in his head like a pulse. *Why? . . . Why? . . . Why? . . .*

"Why?" asked the Archimandrite. "Why did you kill Brother Damianos?"

"I didn't mean to . . . He saw me reach for the ikon . . . I didn't mean to. I am very sorry, believe me —" His mind was clearing now, swiftly; it darted this way and that, seeking a point of escape. "I only wanted to look at the ikon, but he thought I came to steal it. He took me by the throat and I was frightened."

He dropped to his knees and clutched the Father Superior's hand. "Do not turn me over to the police! It was an accident!"

"An accident," murmured the old man. The monks muttered and crossed themselves. "Moses appointed cities of refuge for the manslayer to flee to," the Archimandrite said. "Sanctuaries for those who had killed accidentally. You say you are sorry . . . I shall choose to believe you." The Archimandrite disengaged his hands.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Carpius said.

The monks moved backward — moved away from him, away from the blood.

"We shall not call the police," the old man said. "But you must pray — pray for Divine forgiveness. You must repent. Pray without ceasing."

"I shall." Carpius rose.

It *had* been easy, after all. He turned to pick up the ikon, hiding it by standing between it and the monks. The copy lay on the floor beside the original. He slipped the real one in his pocket. A grating noise interrupted him. He turned to see the door swing shut. A key clattered in the lock. He looked through a small opening in the door. It was a thick door, bound with iron. He pressed his face to the opening, not understanding.

"Pray without ceasing," the Archimandrite repeated. "We shall bring you food and water twice a day, and oil for the lamp. We shall feed you as the ravens fed Elijah. As long as you live we shall feed you, and you must pray for forgiveness."

They moved away.

Carpius stared at the walls around him. The roof was made of stone — he had noticed that; in order to support such a heavy roof, the walls must be very strong and thick . . .

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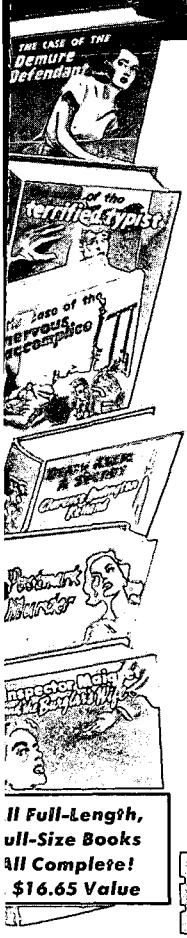
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